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The War of Translation: Colonial Education, American English, and Tagalog Slang in the Philippines

VICENTE L. RAFAEL

This paper examines the role of language in nationalist attempts at decolonization. In the case of the Philippines, American colonial education imposed English as the sole medium of instruction. Native students were required to suppress their vernacular languages so that the classroom became the site for a kind of linguistic war, or better yet, the war of translation. Nationalists have routinely denounced the continued use of English as a morbid symptom of colonial mentality. Yet, such a view was deeply tied to the colonial notion of the sheer instrumentality of language and the notion that translation was a means for the speaker to dominate language as such. However, other practices of translation existed based not on domination but play seen in the classroom and the streets. Popular practices of translation undercut colonial and nationalist ideas about language, providing us with an alternative understanding of translation in democratizing expression in a postcolonial context.

LANGUAGE HAS ALWAYS BEEN a key battleground in the nationalist attempts at decolonization, especially in Southeast Asia. In the case of the Philippines, the legacy of American colonial education included the use of English as a medium of instruction. Learning English, however, required that native students suppress their vernacular languages. The classroom thus became the site for a kind of linguistic war, or better yet, the war of translation. The postwar nationalist response has been to denounce the hegemony of English as a morbid symptom of “colonial mentality” whose continued use would doom native culture and kill the emergent Filipino nation. Yet, as I argue in this essay, such a critique rested on the colonial assumptions about the sheer instrumentality of language. Nationalism, like colonialism, was tied to the ideology that translation was a means for the speaker to assert his or her will to dominate speech, whether one’s own or that of the other. This view tended to set aside the historical reality whereby non-colonial and non-nationalist practices of translation flourished. Such practices were predicated on the play rather than on the domination of language. I examine how such possibilities emerged both in the resistant soundings of English on the part of native students in the classrooms and in the emergence of Tagalog slang during the 1960s and 1970s in the streets. Formed from the woven fragments of vernacular languages, creole Spanish, and American English, Tagalog slang gives us an alternative understanding of the role of translation in democratizing expression in a postcolonial context.

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EDUCATION AS COUNTERINSURGENCY

In an attempt to “pacify” Filipinos during the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), the United States established a network of public schools all over the archipelago. The military governor, General Arthur MacArthur, thought that the schools would have a counterinsurgent effect. They would serve as “adjuncts to military operations,” needed to “expedite the restoration of tranquility throughout the archipelago.”¹ American soldiers were initially assigned to serve as teachers. They were shortly followed by an army of American civilian teachers known as the “Thomasites” (named after the USS *Thomas*, the army transport that brought them to the country) in 1901. By the 1920s, however, most American teachers had been replaced by Filipinos as part of a larger effort to Filipinize the colonial government en route to granting the colony eventual independence.²

The key feature of the colonial public school system was the adoption of English as the sole medium of instruction. Given the considerable linguistic diversity of the archipelago, where more than eighty mutually unintelligible languages continued to be spoken, combined with the unevenness of knowledge of Spanish, whereby only about 5 percent of the population claimed to be fluent despite 350 years of Spanish rule, American policy makers deemed it necessary to use English as the dominant language of rule and education. Within weeks of the occupation of Manila on August 13, 1898, the U.S. military reopened several schools in the city, assigning from among its ranks a teacher of English to each of them. By January of 1901, the colonial civilian government passed a law known as Act 74 that established the Bureau of Education. Among its provisions was the mandatory use of English as the “basis of instruction.”³

From the start, the decision to use English, like that of colonizing the Philippines, was fraught with contradiction. It had the effect of simultaneously incorporating Filipinos into the emergent colonial regime while keeping them at a distance from the metropolitan center. On the one hand, English was meant to speed up pacification, drawing natives closer to American interests and thereby putting an end to their resistance. It was to be a key part of the policy of “benevolent assimilation.” Deemed an essential element for their “uplift,” English would inject erstwhile “savage” Filipinos with “Anglo-Saxon” values. On the other hand, its teaching coincided with the designation of Filipinos as colonial subjects with limited rights. Segregating the archipelago from the mainland, the U.S. Supreme Court defined the Philippines as an “unincorporated” territory, or, in the

¹Cited in Camilo Osias, “Education and Religion,” in *Encyclopedia of the Philippines*, ed. Zoilo M. Galang, 20 vols. (Manila: E. Floro, 1950–58), 9:126. For a more or less critical look at the first thirteen years of colonial education, see Glenn May, *Social Engineering in the Philippines* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 77–126. See also Maria Teresa Trinidad Pineda Tinio, “The Triumph of Tagalog and the Dominance of the Discourse on English: Language Politics in the Philippines During the American Colonial Period,” PhD diss., National University of Singapore, 2009; and Barbara Gaerlan, “The Politics and Pedagogy of Language Use at the University of the Philippines: The History of English as the Medium of Instruction and the Challenges Mounted by Filipinos,” PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1998.

²See Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

³Osias, “Education,” *op. cit.* note 1, 136; May, “Social Engineering,” *op. cit.* note 1, 81–83.

words of Justice White, “foreign in a domestic sense.”⁴ Its people were thus consigned to a racial state of exception. They were subject to American laws but, by virtue of their racial difference, not entitled to the same rights. In a similar vein, mass literacy in English was meant to mitigate social inequalities and pave the way for a more democratic society. Yet, the chronic shortage of funds, the failure to extend universal access to schooling, and the difficulty of retaining most of the students beyond the primary grades meant that education in English was bound to create the conditions for intensifying those inequalities. It eventually created new social divisions based on language use. Alongside a Spanish-speaking elite, there arose an English-speaking minority who achieved fluency and with it greater economic wealth and social influence. By the 1930s, they comprised an impressive 35 percent of the population, making the Philippines the most literate in any Western language in all of colonial Southeast Asia.⁵ However, for the majority who had some years of education, familiarity with English did not necessarily mean fluency, while many others with little or no schooling at all could neither speak nor write in the new language. Barely literate in English, the majority lived in largely vernacular worlds where English (and Spanish) circulated intermittently, emanating as the language of colonial institutions and elites. In other words, the colonial legacy of English, like that of Spanish, included the creation of a linguistic hierarchy that roughly corresponded to a social hierarchy.

In the wake of American rule, one of the most enduring and influential critiques of this colonial linguistic legacy can be found in Renato Constantino’s 1966 essay, “The Mis-education of the Filipino.”⁶ Though written nearly half a century ago, its arguments are still remarkably current among many nationalist intellectuals both in the Philippines and among some Filipino-American scholars today.⁷ Given its staying power on both sides of the Pacific, it is a text that demands serious reconsideration.

MISEDUCATION, AMERICAN ENGLISH, AND NATIONAL DEATH

According to Constantino, if the Philippines remained economically underdeveloped, socially divided, politically corrupt, and culturally bankrupt, it was largely

⁴Downes v. Bidwell, 182 U.S. 244 (1901). See also Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Exceptionalism and the Constitution* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁵Philippines (Commonwealth) Commission of the Census, *Census of the Philippines, 1939*, 5 vols. (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1940–43).

⁶Renato Constantino, “The Mis-education of the Filipino,” originally written in 1959, first published in *The Weekly Graphic*, June 8, 1966. Republished in *The Journal of Contemporary Asia* 1, no. 1 (1970): 20–36. My paginations follow this reprint. The most engrossing biography of Renato Constantino is Rosalinda Pineda Ofreneo, *Renato Constantino: A Life Revisited* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 2001).

⁷For an example of the unreconstructed and uncritical use of Constantino’s essay in the context of Filipino-American studies, see E. San Juan, Jr., “Inventing the Vernacular Speech-Acts: Articulating Filipino Self-Determination in the United States,” *Socialism and Democracy* 19, no. 1 (2005): 136–54, especially 152. See also Ina Alleco R. Silverio, “Removing Filipino as a Subject in College: A Betrayal in the Name of Business?” *Bulatlat.com*, July 23, 2014, <http://bulatlat.com/main/2014/06/27/removing-filipino-as-a-subject-in-college-a-betrayal-in-the-name-of-business/> (accessed January 1, 2015).

because of the fact that it continued to be a colonial appendage of the United States. Two decades after Independence, the country's dependency on America had intensified. Not only did Filipinos continue to be subservient to their former colonial masters, but worse, they craved their subservience. For this "shameful" condition, Constantino places blame squarely on the country's educational system. Run by foreigners, foreign-trained Filipinos, or worse, by an authoritarian clergy, Philippine schools perpetuated the work of colonial education, he claims. They fostered uncritical views of the benevolence of the United States, training Filipinos to blindly embrace American models. "Nurtured in this kind of education," he writes, "the Filipino mind has come to regard centuries of colonial status as a grace from above rather than a scourge."⁸ Rather than enlighten students, schools were guilty of furthering their state of tutelage. They thus educated students by miseducating them, leading students to believe that they could be modern by being "little Americans." Students were consigned to the impossible task of seeking what they could never attain by trying to become other than who they were supposed to be. In this way, colonial education foreclosed their future. It kept them ignorant, holding the country in a state of abject backwardness. While other Asian countries were then vigorously promoting their national cultures along with their national economies, the Filipinos continued to disavow their distinctiveness. Deferring to America, they were deluded into thinking of themselves as exceptional Asians: as "Filipino Americans." In short, schools produced subjects incapable of knowing themselves, much less understanding the "basic ills" of their country. Barred from the truth of their being, they were deprived of the true knowledge of their past marked by imperial injustice and anti-colonial struggles. As such, Filipinos could not be redeemed for the future.

The "tragedy" of miseducation thus revolves around the frustration of a nationalist teleology. Colonial conquest is supposed to beget anti-colonial resistance, which in turn is supposed to give birth to a sovereign people steeped in the righteousness of their struggle and the knowledge of their destiny. This is the truth of nationalism, the justice of its cause. Miseducation has concealed and distorted such a truth inasmuch as schools collaborate in carrying out American designs. For Constantino, the chief tool for bringing about the tragedy of miseducation is the very language of instruction, English. The hegemony of English—its power to shape thinking and constrain dissent—stems from its historical deployment as a weapon of colonial conquest.

As the "master stroke" of colonial education, the use of English as the sole medium of instruction had the effect of "separat[ing] the Filipinos from their past" while dividing "educated Filipinos from their countrymen." Thanks to English, native students were turned into "carbon copies of [their] conqueror."⁹ Rather than unify native societies by providing a common language, English intensified social divisions while promoting historical amnesia. An alien language, it could only produce alienating effects. It turned natives neither into Filipinos nor Americans but into copies of the latter. Thus did natives become triply displaced: not only from whom they had been as native peoples, and from what they were destined to be as national subjects, but also from what they were

⁸Constantino, "Miseducation," *op. cit.* note 5, 29.

⁹*Ibid.*, 24.

taught to become but were barred from achieving: faithful copies of their colonial masters.

Sent ontologically adrift by English, natives could only grasp a “distorted” view of their history. “The history of our ancestors was taken up as if they were a strange and foreign people who settled in these shores. . . . We read about them as if we were tourists in a foreign land.”¹⁰ English thus completes the task of conquest by imaginatively displacing the natives from their own land. Compelled to speak the master’s tongue, the natives actively identify and collaborate in this displacement. As “tourists,” natives confront their own past as if it were someone else’s, just as they regard their own land as a transient possession, as if they were renting it from some other owner. So, too, with their native tongue. Learning English has meant suppressing the vernacular language. Here, it is worth recalling that as late as the 1960s, students were routinely fined five or ten centavos by teachers who caught them conversing in their native languages in school. Still, the fact remains, Constantino argues, that English could never take the place of the vernacular. It has instead remained irreducibly foreign, incapable of finding a proper home among Filipinos. The foreignness of English comes not only with its association with conquest but also through its very agents of transmission. Early on, American teachers taught the language but were eventually replaced by Filipinos for whom English was at best a second and often imperfectly spoken tongue.

For this reason, education in English has produced an intolerable linguistic and social situation. On the one hand, students are unable to master the master’s speech inasmuch as its sounds, references, and nuances remain outside of their experiences. On the other hand, they have lost their capacity to speak their mother tongue, which has been forbidden to them. Bereft of fluency in any language, students are unable to think and express themselves except in the most “mechanical way.” This makes for a “deplorable lack of serious thinking” in society. “We half understand books and periodicals written in English. We find it an ordeal to communicate with each other through a foreign medium, and yet we have so neglected our native language that we find ourselves at a loss in expressing ourselves in this language.”¹¹ The bio-political consequences of this situation have been nothing short of disastrous. Having failed in its function as a *lingua franca*, English lets leaders speak only “in general and vague terms” while reducing the masses to a state of inarticulateness, incapable of “expressing [themselves] in any language.”¹² Originally envisioned as a medium for democratizing society, English has proven to be a barrier to such a project. Hence, not only does English produce historical forgetting but also, by suppressing native speech while remaining foreign to native speakers, English sets the condition for the self-annihilation of the Filipino people.

For Constantino, then, to embrace a foreign language instead of one’s own is tantamount to signing the nation’s death warrant. Miseducation thus climaxes with the suicide of natives who abandon themselves to the very forces that negate them. Writing in English, the nationalist author, without any trace of irony, warns of its fatal consequences. For English can only render natives immune to the very source of their lives, which is

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 33.

¹²Ibid., 31.

their mother tongue—the nature of which remains ambiguous in an archipelago of numerous mother tongues—and in so doing can only lead to their self-destruction.

What do we make of Constantino's diagnosis? Does the promise of a foreign, colonial language invariably turn out to be a curse? Does it always lead to the self-destruction of the miseducated? Or can miseducation itself give rise to something and someone other than the suicidal colonized subject? Are there ways by which the nation can survive, perhaps even transform its miseducated state? Can the desire, even if it is forever deferred, for a foreign language—the master's speech—bring about not death but another form of life? And could we think of this life as one that, while steeped in the history of the colonial, also escapes it? And in escaping it, also revises the tragic vision and unfinished history of the national?

In the latter section of Constantino's essay, we get a hint of this other possibility. Rather than the self-inflicted death of a failed national subject, English could also produce "appreciation" from the masses. "Because of their lack of command of English, the masses have gotten used to only half-understanding what is said to them in English. They appreciate the sounds without knowing the sense. This is a barrier to democracy."¹³ Confronted with foreign words, the masses fail to grasp their meaning but nonetheless "appreciate" their sonic qualities. They are drawn to the sensuous features of English and see in them a certain attraction. Constantino laments the failure of the masses to fully understand what is said to them. He assumes this means they cannot speak back, thus hindering their political participation. The masses seem more interested in apprehending rather than comprehending English. They are compelled less by its meaning than by its materiality, or perhaps conflate the one with the other. Such a response suggests a stance towards English at variance with nationalist expectations. In privileging sound over sense, the masses, whoever they are, seem to find a way to make room for English alongside rather than on top of the vernacular. In so doing, they seem to translate its strangeness from a menace into a resource. How is this possible? Is there another history working within colonial education that might allow us to see this other kind of relationship with English?

SONIC MONSTROSITIES AND THE INSURGENCIES OF SPEECH

In 1924, the Lebanese-American colonial official and scholar Najeeb Saleeby published a series of lectures he delivered in Manila on the problem of English-language education. Constantino quotes approvingly from Saleeby to support his argument about the inherent inability of English to serve as a lingua franca for democratizing the country. But a closer reading of these passages suggests that Saleeby was not just critical of colonial efforts to use English as the sole medium of instruction in schools. He was equally impressed by the power of the vernacular languages to withstand the deployment of English. Just as "three centuries of Spanish rule . . . failed to check the vernacular . . . twenty five years of intensive English education has produced no radical change. More people at present [i.e., 1924] speak English than Spanish, but the great majority hold

¹³Ibid.

on to the local dialect.”¹⁴ Writing about forty years before Constantino, Saleeby tells a slightly different story. Where Constantino sees only the overwhelming victory of colonial education and the unquestioned hegemony of English, Saleeby sees the inability of English to take hold in schools and regards this as a sign of the failure and hubris of American colonial policy. Even more significant, while Constantino bemoans the neglect of the vernaculars in the face of English in the 1960s, Saleeby remarks on the tenacity of native languages that students hold on to in the face of English in the 1920s. In reading Saleeby, we get a sense that the vernacular had not yet been and, perhaps, could never be repressed. Efforts to supplant it with English produced effects other than those intended by colonial educators and denounced by the nationalist intellectual. It is to these other effects that I now want to turn.

In 1925, the all-Filipino colonial legislature commissioned a study of colonial schooling from a committee headed by Paul Monroe of Columbia University. The result was a massive report, *A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands*.¹⁵ The *Survey* sought to assess the conditions of public schooling, especially in the wake of the Jones Law of 1916 that had mandated the swift Filipinization of the colonial bureaucracy, including those related to public education. The *Survey* was roundly critical of public schooling. It was especially dismayed at the teaching of English. As “the most critical issue in the Philippine school situation,” the *Survey* devotes detailed attention to investigating the “obstacles” that interfered with the teaching of English.¹⁶ While the *Survey* was impressed by the enthusiasm of Filipinos for schools where attendance was free and non-compulsory, it was far more disappointed by the inability of Filipino teachers and students to develop a working fluency of American English. In accounting for this failure, it mentions a number of reasons, ranging from the acute shortage of American teachers (roughly 1 percent of the teaching personnel by 1920) to the inadequate training of Filipino teachers. The small numbers of American teachers meant that there was little opportunity to correct Filipino teachers who as non-native speakers of English were prone to transmit and consolidate errors of grammar and pronunciation to their students.

But the most significant obstacle to gaining fluency in English according to the *Survey* was the vernacular languages themselves. Over and over again, the *Survey* complains about the great disadvantage faced by English forced to compete with the native languages. Children entered school after seven or eight years of speaking their mother tongue. Physically attuned and mentally habituated to its intonations, referents, and rhythm, they were then expected in school to switch over to an entirely different foreign language. Such a sudden transition, according to the *Survey*, had the effect of deterring children from learning. The task of learning English, which entailed unlearning the vernacular, took them away from the task of learning as such. They were thus

¹⁴Najeeb Mitry Saleeby, *The Language of Education of the Philippine Islands* (Manila, 1924), quoted in Constantino, *op. cit.* note 5, 32. For a related critique of the limited utility of English, see also the speech of vice-governor and head of the Bureau of Education, George C. Butte, “Shall the Philippines Have a Common Language” (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1931), especially 14 and 19–20.

¹⁵Paul Monroe, Board of Educational Survey, Philippines, *A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands by the Board of Educational Surveys: Created Under Acts 3162 and 3196 of the Philippine Legislature* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1925).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

burdened with the demand to speak otherwise as a prerequisite to being able to speak at all. In this way, English created a kind of disability. It constituted what the *Survey* calls a “foreign language handicap”:

The foreign language handicap . . . is from the start a serious obstacle to success in teaching. From the day a Filipino child enters school he is confronted by the double necessity of mastering a strange tongue and of carrying out school work in it. At no time in his career does he encounter the single task of studying in his mother tongue. He is required to read not in Visayan, not in Tagalog, not in Ilocano, not in Bicol—but in English. He faces the necessity of mastering the intricacies of oral speech in a language almost completely unphonetic and totally removed in accent, rhythm, tonal expression and phonetic organization from the one which he hears on the playground, at home and in the community. During seven years of childhood . . . he has acquired the difficult coordinations [*sic*] of pronunciation of his native dialect. When he enters school he must disregard and attempt to blot these out of his habit system. . . . Not only do the old habits fail to facilitate but they actually inhibit the acquisition of new ones.¹⁷

Coming to school meant leaving the home, stepping into a foreign space dominated by the other’s speech. One left one’s mother and mother tongue to stand before a foreign language. One was exposed to the specific, exacting demands of the foreign for several hours a day, forced to conform one’s body and voice to its commands and expectations. Submission to the rigors of English, however, was deemed as a way of eventually mastering it. Confronting the other’s speech, one was trained to conquer it, to possess it and make it an integral part of oneself. The goal of mastery, however, proved elusive. Children were put at a permanent disadvantage by the historical purchase of the vernacular. They were handicapped in view of the persistent influence of the mother tongue, which established a formidable barrier to the learning of the other tongue. In school, children were expected to engage in a veritable war of separation. They were supposed to “disregard and . . . blot out” the habits of speech from home. To speak English meant repressing the vernacular. This entailed exchanging the body at home with the first language for a new body capable of conquering a second tongue. Put differently, learning English required the labor of translation. Compelled to substitute the first “premodern” language for a second “modern” one, children were expected to perform the work of translation as the essential prelude to learning. The problem, according to the *Survey*, was that for the Filipino student, translation never ceased. “If he is to come from the school a well trained thinker, he must be taught to think in a foreign language. The handicap of translation must be overcome.”¹⁸

The “foreign language handicap” turns out to be the handicap of translation. For learning to occur, translation must be overcome. Indeed, it was precisely the problems posed by translation that shaped the American decision to use English rather than Spanish or the native languages as the sole medium of instruction. Fred Atkinson, who served as the first Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1901 to 1902, initially

¹⁷Ibid., 127.

¹⁸Ibid., 128.

considered using the native languages for the primary grades, but quickly changed his mind, saying that such a move would be “impractical. . . . [I]t would necessitate the setting of large corps of translators at work, putting not merely school primers but large numbers of books of every sort into all the principal dialects.” Neither would Spanish do since “only a small portion of the native population understood much Spanish,” and almost no Americans could be found who could teach in that language.¹⁹

English as the “practical” alternative to other languages implied two things. First, it meant that Americans were saved from the necessity of learning Spanish or the native languages. Instead, they shifted the burden of translation onto Filipinos. As native speakers of English, Americans were exempt from the taxing demands of having to speak otherwise, remaining comfortably monolingual. Second, Americans thought that by teaching Filipinos English, they were endowing the latter with a common language. Learning English would enable natives to move out of their first language into a second language with which to reach across linguistic and social divisions. Thus would they come to have something in common not only with one another but with those who ruled them. English would allow them to communicate directly with anyone in the country without resorting to another language. In this way, they would be freed from the need to translate from one language to another. Once fluent in English, Filipinos would become like Americans, relieved from the arduous task of translating. The “practicality” of teaching English therefore had an ideological dimension.

Realizing this goal, however, proved practically impossible thanks to the workings of the vernacular. “During the years in which children are struggling with the new language . . . their efforts are being combated constantly by the pervasive influence of the dialect with which they are surrounded in all their out of school hours.”²⁰ Children who found themselves assailed by English in school could hope to find relief with the vernacular at home. Back in school, however, children found themselves plunged into an asymmetrical war with English. They were forced to translate in a particular way, by suppressing their first language in favor of a second one. Translation as such was meant to allow children to eventually dominate the language that had until then dominated them. Suppressing the vernacular and gaining fluency in English were thus conceived as part of a single movement that would enable students to think in the other language. Thinking, in turn, meant no longer having to translate. Overcoming the “handicap” of translation meant making the foreign familiar rather than merely fearsome, taming it into an instrument of one’s thought and a ready servant of one’s expression.

Created as a counterinsurgent response to the Philippine-American War, colonial education sought to train colonized subjects in a different sort of war. We might think of this as the war of translation. The pursuit of this war aimed at the conquest and colonization of languages, both the vernaculars and English. As we have seen, mastering the second required setting aside the first. School was the site for the production and consolidation of this linguistic hierarchy. Students learned to translate by way of putting the mother tongue in its place, under the domination of a foreign one, thereby coming to dominate the foreign language themselves. Winning this double victory would then transform

¹⁹See May, *Social Engineering*, *op. cit.* note 1, 83.

²⁰Monroe, *Survey of the Educational System*, *op. cit.* note 14, 40.

students into new subjects standing atop and in control of the linguistic hierarchy. Colonizing both languages, holding each to their respective places, the educated subjects could then command language itself in the service of their thoughts and expressions. Doing so meant putting an end to the labor of translation or at least minimizing its visibility, which could only detract from the appearance of thought. The war of translation was thus also meant to be a war *on* translation. It would conclude in the unequal peace among languages that would establish the rule of the thinking subject over the means and materials of its production.

The *Survey* makes clear, however, that the aims of colonial education were far from being realized. There seemed to be no end to the war of translation. English remained foreign and external to students, while the vernaculars refused to keep to their place. In fact, it seemed to the Americans that the very attempt to teach English simply inflamed the resistance of the native languages. The insurgent energy of the vernaculars was most visible and audible in their insistent claims on the bodies of the Filipino teachers and students. The vernaculars' capacity to infiltrate the scene of instruction became particularly palpable to the Americans when they heard the "Filipinized English" recited daily in the classrooms. Again and again, the *Survey* remarks on what to the Americans appeared to be errors that came with Filipino attempts to speak English. It began with the Filipino teacher. Lacking in training, she addressed her students,

in strange words, words clothed, however, in the familiar . . . monotone of the Malayan dialects. Be their native tongue Tagalog, Ilocano, Bicol, Visayan, Pampangan, what not, the teachers of the Islands are passing on to the children partial English pronunciations set in the rhythm and cadence of their own tongues. It is our judgment that this setting of Malay rhythm, accent and syllabication is the chief source of unintelligibility. . . . The Filipino child learns to attach meanings to familiar objects and actions which have been named by his teacher in strange sounding words. He listens to the new sounds; he tries to utter them. He hears these strange English words uttered with the familiar Filipino intonation.²¹

Hearing the teacher's English, students followed. But doing so, they were misled, perhaps miseducated, taking a different path. They ended up not on the road to phonetically correct American English but to the "strange" and "unintelligible" zone of its Filipinized version. "Filipinized English" here consisted of dressing English in the clothes of "Malay" sound patterns. It was an English that perplexed the authors of the *Survey*. Students addressed in Filipinized English readily recognized the vernacular shaping the materiality of foreign words, and it was this recognition that allowed them to follow the teacher's voice. They saw in the foreign the recurrence of the vernacular, not its demise. To translate in this case required not the suppression of the first for the second language, but an alertness to the sound of the first retracing itself around the appearance of the second. In this way, the classroom was no longer cut off from the home. The mother tongue insinuated itself into the foreign one, blurring the lines between what

²¹Ibid., 155.

was inside and what was outside the school. English thus reframed was no longer simply a weapon of colonial conquest. In the hands and on the mouths of Filipino teachers and students, it became a language for accommodating, or at least signaling the insistent presence of what was supposed to be excluded and overcome. Conserving the foreignness of English also meant making room for the recurring traces of the vernacular.²²

For the Americans, however, the Filipinization of English was a source of acute annoyance. It was the symptom of the dismal limits of colonial policy and evidence of the racial incapacities of Filipinos. Their “Malay dialects,” so different from American English, had the effect of converting their own native tongue into a kind of foreign speech. Filipinos had in effect forced English to appear in drag. Particularly egregious from the American perspective were the “sound mutations” that Filipinos performed on English, resulting in veritable sonic monstrosities. Conducting a series of long and detailed tests among thousands of students through many parts of the archipelago, the *Survey* categorized and quantified these phonetic mutations. It considered them to be grave errors that had to be “eradicated” if Filipinos were ever to achieve fluency in English:

If American English is to become the language of the school and eventually the Islands, teachers must work hard to correct these errors. . . . They must learn to say: is, was, and has instead of *iss*, *wass*, *hass*; can instead of *caan*; river instead of *reevair*; servant instead of *serbant*; go instead of *gu* . . . stream instead of *strim*; of instead of *off*; put instead of *poot*; the instead of *de*; late instead of *let*; pen instead of *pin*; tooth instead of *tut*; progress and perceive instead of *frogress* and *ferceive*.²³

And so forth.

For other Americans, Filipinized English was more than a source of annoyance. Some experienced it as a violent assault. There was, for example, the case of Jerome Barry, a former American schoolteacher and superintendent in Albay Province in 1918. In an essay titled “A Little Brown Language,”²⁴ he describes instances of Filipino teachers’ written and spoken English. These amount, he claims, to the “perversion, contortion and mauling [of] our familiar phraseology out of most of its intelligibility. . . .” Filipino teachers are guilty of

years of malpractice . . . in mispronunciation so far-fetched that only one trained by experience could recognize he was not speaking a strange and esoteric jargon. . . . For Filipino English as it is spoken needs but a stride or two to become a foreign language. At present an American requires a brief period of training before his ear can interpret these strange utterances as a version of his mother tongue.²⁵

²²For an early colonial Tagalog precedent for this linguistic practice, see Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), especially chap. 2.

²³Monroe, *Survey of the Educational System*, *op. cit.* note 14, 158–59.

²⁴Jerome Barry, “A Little Brown Language,” *American Speech* 3, no. 1 (1927): 14–20.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 15, 20.

Two decades of colonial education in English had thus produced not the hegemony of English but its transformation into a language foreign to the Americans themselves. Vernacularizing the foreign, Filipinos sustained the work of translation, disorienting their American interlocutors. Indeed, Barry blames the unending operation of translation for obscuring thought and confusing conversations between Filipinos and Americans. “Naturally much of his thinking . . . must be conceived in the native dialect, and laboriously translated into English.” The result is that “in conversation, the necessity of translation and the frequent literal rendition of native locutions result in many misunderstandings.”²⁶

Expecting Filipinos to speak in their, that is, the Americans’ language, the latter instead got back something else: not English as they recognized it but the sense of translation at work. It was not, therefore, the Filipino subjects that emerged, masters of a foreign tongue with which to make plain their thoughts to the Americans. Instead the latter were confronted with the relentless movements of the speakers, moving back and forth between their own and the other’s language. What came across was neither the meaning of words nor the settled identity of the speakers and the hearers but rather the sense of the unstable and shifting relationship of languages to one another and to their users. Translation resulted not in the emergence of thought but in the spread of “misunderstanding.” This misunderstanding, however, was not meaningless. It consisted of sending out certain messages. It signaled to the American interlocutors, for instance, not only the ongoing labor of translation but also the desire for communication on the part of the Filipinos. It was a desire that formed around the conjunction rather than the separation of English from the vernacular. Communication tenuously linked to comprehension, connection loosened from linguistic hierarchy: this was the war of translation that the Filipinos brought to the Americans. It was one where the vernacular escaped the physiological control of the native body and the pedagogical supervision of the American teachers, smuggling its way into the spaces of English, transforming its sounds and displacing its referents. In the ongoing war of translation, misunderstanding proliferated. Rather than defer to thought, language indefinitely postponed its arrival, suspending the authority of both the speakers and the interlocutors over the scene of communication.

Faced with this disconcerting onslaught of what Barry deprecatingly refers to as the “little brown language,” what were the American teachers to do? Was there a place where they could retreat and escape the “diverse and astounding quackings” of their students who violated English with their “untrainable tongues,” where even the most attentive ones were prone to such utterances as “*Oh, seer, weel you geeve me bock my pod of pay-pairr?*”²⁷ There was, according to Barry, one area of English where the natives could not go. It was a region of speech where Americans could converse among themselves, confident in the thought that they would remain unintelligible and thus free from the assaults of Filipinization. This zone of safety was American slang. Given the “bookishness” of Filipinos’ English vocabulary, they could not hope to penetrate the “slang and colloquialisms that are current in our everyday speech.”²⁸ It was precisely because of its currency—its

²⁶Ibid., 16.

²⁷Ibid., 19.

²⁸Ibid.

swift changes of meaning as these came in and out of fashion, drawing boundaries around some speakers while excluding others—that American slang could have a specificity impervious to Filipinization. As highly contingent, largely anonymous, and temporally transient speech acts, slang retained a singularity that made it seem untranslatable. Hence, Filipino attempts to use American slang were bound to sound absurd, according to Barry. To prove this, he cites a letter from a schoolteacher in Capiz complaining to his American supervisor. Wanting to communicate his anger in English, the teacher ends his letter with “For the love of mud, kid, and why do you do me this way? Dog gone! Great scott! Yours very truly, etc.”²⁹

The laughable conjunction of colloquial expressions with rhetorical deference proves to Barry that American slang “is a sealed book to the ordinary native, educated though he may be.” Barry, however, cites one exception: the “Manila *cochero*” or coach driver. He has become “a master of the profane.”³⁰ We can imagine the uneducated *cochero*, plying the streets of the city, picking up passengers, dodging pedestrians and other *calesas*. Overhearing conversations in English, he intercepts profanities, hurling them at others when he has the chance. Out of school, he nonetheless learns a kind of English, one that is close to Americans’ English but closed off to most other educated Filipinos. It is not hard to imagine the Manila *cochero* as part of the “masses” that Constantino describes as “inarticulate.” *Cocheros*, *tinderas*, *cargadores*, *criados*, and other workers may have attended a couple of years of school, but more likely none at all. They were supposed to be reduced to passive acquiescence and confused speech by the hegemony of English and the neglect of the vernaculars. And yet they seem to have been, at least from this American account, capable of mastering the most inaccessible aspect of English.

What do we make of this seemingly flippant observation? Where else can we find evidence of what Constantino refers to as the mass “appreciation” of the sound of English, or what Barry calls the mastery of its most profane aspects? In what way do such appreciation and mastery reflect popular practices of translating the foreign beyond the confines of schooling and condemnations of nationalist criticism?

THE PLAY OF TRANSLATION AND THE “BARKADA” OF LANGUAGES

To get a sense of the popular practices of translation, I want to turn to an important but largely forgotten essay by the writer Nick Joaquin (1917–2004), “The Language of the Streets.”³¹ Written in 1963, it was similarly caught up in the postcolonial obsession with

²⁹Ibid., 17–18.

³⁰Ibid., 17.

³¹Nick Joaquin’s “The Language of the Streets” first appeared in 1963 and has been republished in Quijano de Manila, *The Language of the Streets and Other Essays* (Manila: National Bookstore, 1980), 3–21. For the most informative biographical information on Joaquin, see Resil B. Mojares, “Biography of Nick Joaquin,” Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, 1996, <https://filipinoscribbles.wordpress.com/tag/resil-b-mojares/> (accessed February 7, 2015); and Marra PL. Lanot, *The Trouble with Nick and Other Profiles* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999), republished in “The Trouble with Nick,” *Bulatlat* 4, no. 13 (2004), <http://www.bulatlat.com/news/4-13/4-13-nick.html> (accessed January 14, 2015).

language and nationhood. But unlike Constantino's view of miseducation in English as historical tragedy, Joaquin provides a radically different and far more joyful account of linguistic history, one that gives the *cochero* and others like him their due. It is an essay that has been overlooked perhaps because of the ways it slides away from accepted colonial and nationalist views. It is precisely for this reason that it bears close reading.

Joaquin begins not by continuing to wage the Philippine-American War over the legacy of English and colonial education as Constantino does. Instead, he invokes the American literary critic and journalist H. L. Mencken on slang to buttress his argument that "[s]lang, once scorned as the bastard of language, has risen to the status of heir of the house and begetter of literature."³² With Mencken, Joaquin proposes to treat slang, or what he calls "the language of the streets," not as a "debased" or inferior version of standard speech, but as the very basis of a national literature. He focuses particularly on Tagalog slang, which he claims has long been the "common possession of Filipinos."³³ As a lingua franca, it forms the basis of the true national language:

It in fact is the national language, not Filipino, [one that is] a natural growth from below, not a decree from above. This language . . . is the most daring, the most alive, the most used language in the country today. . . . [It] is being created by the masses, out in the open, to express their lives, to express their times, and just for the fun of it. That's why it promises to be a great language: because it's being created for the sheer joy of creating. *Happy-happy lang!*³⁴

That a national language has emerged outside the control of official academies and colonial education suggests the workings of a history missed by nationalist writers. How can Tagalog slang serve as the basis for the national language? It is because slang, according to Joaquin, works like a lingua franca. It travels across linguistic and social boundaries with great speed, thanks to the commercial mass media, enabling speakers of various vernaculars to understand one another. In this way, Tagalog slang assumes the historical legacy of Spanish. Herein lies another startling contrast with Constantino. Where the nationalist holds on to the notion of languages as mutually discrete and arranged in a hierarchy—Spanish or English historically and oppressively lording it over the vernaculars—Joaquin sees the colonial language of Spanish at the basis of Tagalog slang, indeed of all Tagalog as it is currently spoken. Such a view is consistent with a recurring theme in Joaquin's literary and historical writing: that the colonial is inextricably wed to the national as the latter's condition of possibility. "Spanish," he writes, "is not dead in the Philippines. We unknowingly speak it every moment of our lives."³⁵ Castilian loan words such as "*calle, mesa, tren, pier, vapor, libro, coche, cine, gobierno, Dios*" permeate nearly all Philippine languages. Unlike indigenous words, which are genetically related but distinct in their spellings and pronunciations, Spanish words are immediately recognizable across vernaculars.³⁶ This great loan of words has accrued

³²Joaquin, "The Language," *op. cit.* note 30, 3.

³³*Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 4, 18.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 12.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

enormous interest over time, investing vernacular languages with something in common. What was once the language of imperial authority has come to be parceled and circulated, borrowed and shared to provide “the foundation of a national language.”³⁷

Here, the power of Spanish is felt most acutely when it has become powerless to command. It has been detached and broken up from its original speakers and woven into the fabric of local languages. The foundational significance of Spanish then lies not in its ability to dominate the vernaculars from above or to serve as their horizon of their reference. Rather, it has to do with its capacity to connect and conjoin them while leaving them distinct. That is, it allows for the recognition of something held in common among languages without reducing their differences.³⁸ Through three and a half centuries of Spanish rule, many Castilian words have seeped through the vernaculars, becoming indistinguishable parts of their vocabulary. By the late nineteenth century, as Emmanuel Luis Romanillos and Benedict Anderson have pointed out, a mix of Spanish, vernacular languages like Tagalog, and Chinese languages like Hokkien had amalgamated into a lingua franca known by many names: *español de Parian*, *chabacano*, or *lengua de tienda*, for example. It had become widespread in Manila and its surroundings as well as in other port cities in the Philippines. This *creole* language grew around the marketplace, spread throughout the streets, traveled up and down the social hierarchy, and was quickly picked up by new arrivals from Europe. As Anderson describes it, *español de Parian*, that is, the Spanish of the Parian, the Chinese quarter designated by the Spaniards just outside the walls of Manila, was “a real, Hokkien-inflected lingua franca for the streets of Manila, egalitarianly shared by poor vendors and their elite student customers. A patois . . . but also an instrument of social communication, not an emblem of political shame.”³⁹ It continued to survive and even flourish in many parts of the country in the wake of the American invasion and occupation, especially in the Ermita district till the end of World War II, and is still spoken in parts of Cavite, Cotabato, and Zamboanga.⁴⁰

Joaquin argues that Tagalog slang (and we can perhaps extrapolate this to cover other, non-Tagalog languages) is the proper heir to what he calls “Spanish,” but what historically was *español de Parian*.⁴¹ It “flows” through all the local languages, but

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸See Vicente L. Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), chap. 6.

³⁹Benedict Anderson, *Why Counting Counts: A Study of Forms of Consciousness and Problems of Language in Noli me Tangere and El Filibusterismo* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), 79. See also Emmanuel Luis Romanillos, “El Chabacano de Cavite: Crepusculo de un Criollo Hispano-Filipino?” [The Chabacano of Cavite: The Twilight of a Spanish-Filipino Creole?], *Linguae et Litterae* 1 (1992), 9–14. See also Carme Guerrero Nakpil’s account of speaking Ermita Spanish during the 1930s in her autobiography, *Myself, Elsewhere* (Manila: Circe Communications, 2006), 75–76.

⁴⁰Indeed, as Anderson conjectures, had the United States not arrived and the First Republic survived, Spanish would have become one of the official languages of the state while “a kind of Filipino Spanish would have become, de facto, either the official language or the country’s lingua franca” (Anderson, *Why Counting Counts*, *op. cit.* note 37, 84). It would have been, as Joaquin would say regarding Tagalog slang, a language that would be “open to everyone to adapt it, corrupt it, change it in accord with local needs” (86).

⁴¹Joaquin, like many others who have written about Tagalog slang or Taglish, elides the presence of Hokkien contributions to the lingua franca or national language in the same way that he tends to repress the profound Chinese presence in Philippine history.

acknowledges neither source nor directive. It comes instead from “the anonymous word-coiners on the street” who through no coordinated or systematic efforts nonetheless “are doing more to speed the coming of a common tongue than all the schools and the academics put together.”⁴² If this is the case, then the foundational status of Tagalog—or presumably, any other vernacular—slang, like Spanish, will have to be qualified. They cannot be seen to form a firm bedrock on which the national language is built, but shifting and contingent nodes linking various languages as in a network. Slang as the contingent foundation of a common speech operates in a distributive and decentralized fashion. Hence, it can only have variable and unknown authors, obscure and unverifiable origins, indiscriminate interlocutors, along with uncertain and erratic life spans. This “coming of a common tongue” feels like a messianism without a messiah. It has always already happened, but it is always yet to arrive.

In coming, this common tongue shows its power to register particular moments in the nation’s historical becoming. Constantino, as we saw, feared that colonial education through English would obliterate the true history of the country’s anti-colonial struggles. Joaquin sees a possible antidote to this amnesia in slang’s capacity to “sum up a whole period.” It does so by its rampant theft (for this is one of the purported origins of the word “slang”) of other languages, including other vernaculars. For example, there is *sipsip buto* from Ilocano, popular in the 1930s to denote the political sycophants that surrounded Commonwealth president Manuel L. Quezon; *genoowine* from the English “genuine” widely used during the Japanese Occupation to refer to anything good and of great value; and the withering *Hanggang pier ka lang*, “He’s only taking you as far as the pier,” often heard during the American reoccupation of the country after the war, addressed to Filipina women having relations with American servicemen.⁴³ Joaquin excavates other linguistic artifacts that preserve the fleeting images and sensations of other eras: from the 1920s, *stamby* (bum, lumpen) who could easily become a thug or *maton*, *sangano*, and *butangero*.⁴⁴ In the 1930s, a new social type emerged: the fashionable man about town, cocksure and a touch arrogant, known as *hambug*, *sikat*, or *sigá-sigá*,⁴⁵ while the new urban experience of going out on the town was referred to as *naggoo-good-time*, that is, “having a good time.”⁴⁶ Flash forward to the late 1960s and 1970s when *class* replaced *genoowine*, *jingle* was to urinate, and the formative years of a new gay culture is archived by such words as “*T-Y* (thanks), *sibai* (call boy), *serbis* (paid sex), and *type* (somebody you’re aroused by),” as well as the all-purpose affirmation, “*Anong say mo!*” What do you say!⁴⁷ The history of the drug culture that accompanied the spread of American youth culture in the Philippines is embedded in the numerous terms for getting stoned, as in *trip*; *durog*; *durog na durog*; *shotgun*; *iskor* (i.e., to buy drugs); *bitin* (not high enough); and *high na high* (very high) and its synonyms, *banggag*, *sabog*, and *basag*.⁴⁸ Joaquin sums up the whole era with the word that replaces

⁴²Joaquin, “The Language,” *op. cit.* note 30, 5.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 19–20.

the 1920s *siga: jeproks*, “which can mean anything from hippie to mod to rebel to flamboyant [youth].”⁴⁹

For Joaquin, cataloguing slang terms provides hurried glimpses into a history of emergent social types; novel subcultural formations; and popular practices around fashion, sex, leisure, and consumption. These words are shards that do not necessarily add up to a whole. Instead they remain fragments of larger narratives yet to be written, the traces of social histories that may never be told. Here, language does not reveal historical truth, which brings self-knowledge and national redemption. The bits and pieces of slang instead suddenly trigger the recollection of the past as fractured, inconclusive moments through a series of linguistic associations. One slides gleefully from *trip* to *durog* to *durog na durog*, to *banggag*, to *basag*, to *jeproks*, and so on without pausing to think what they all mean, only that they stimulate more associations. These chains of associations are potentially endless and so are likely to be of little use to nationalist historiography. In the drama of nationalism, as explicated by Constantino, language linked to education is a matter of life and death. The very survival of a people is at stake in the future of English and the national language. By contrast, Joaquin’s linguistic history suggests something else is at play. In “summing up an era,” Tagalog slang converts the past into language, that is, into a series of expressive possibilities over which no one has the first or final word. By reconfiguring the past into an ever-expanding constellation of associations, slang for Joaquin opens up speech and loosens the grip of linguistic hierarchy. Such a development leads, arguably, to the very democratization of society that Constantino had longed for. The basis for a common language emerges through the sudden but recurring appearance of slang, converting the most mundane and abject aspects of life into rich and commonly available sources of the literary.

To see these literary possibilities at work, we can look at the following example. Joaquin explicates the Tagalog term *barkada*, made up of one’s closest friends, at times referred to as *ka-rancho* (that is, from the same ranch) or *chokaran* (the syllabic inversion of *ka-rancho*). Popular since the 1950s, the term comes from the Spanish *barco*, or boat, which brings it in association with the precolonial Tagalog *barangay*, the word for boat as well as village. But Joaquin does not stop at translating *barkada* into English. He deploys it alongside related slang terms. In the process of talking about *barkada*, he begins to tell a story not only about its possible associations but of the network of other words that lead away from these associations:

When a *barkada* has an *atraxo* that means *trobol*, a *rambol*, a *golpehan*, also described as *balasahan*, or shuffle. In a good *barkada*, every member is *kumakasa* or fighter. . . . A *kumakasa* would rather be *tepok*—that is, killed—than find himself turned into an *under*, or stooge. Such a fate is *diahe*, or *hadya*, slang’s coyer version of a major Filipino term: *hiya*, shame.

But a *barkada*’s chief foe is always the law, represented by the policeman who is known as *lespo*, *alat* [i.e., *tala* or star spelled backwards, a reference to his badge] or—this is the latest term—*parak*. *Alagad ng batas* [i.e., officers of the law] is,

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 21.

like all formal Filipino phraseology, uttered only with a smile. . . . When the *alat* appears it's best to *batse* or *sebat*, derivations from the Spanish *se va* and *pase*. If you don't *botak* fast enough, you end up in *Munti* [i.e., Muntinglupa, the penitentiary] and your *chokarans* explain you're *na sa loob* [inside] where if you're *guwapo* [i.e., good looking] you may find yourself forced to become some tougher convict's *señorita*. But if you're ugly—*askdad* is the word for it—you'll still have to pay tribute in the form of *yosi* (cigarettes) or *maman* (liquor) or *atik* (money).

Atik, one of the most used expressions today is the Tagalog word for earnings, *kita*, spelled backwards. A guy with a lot of money is *maniac*; to be broke is to *lawang-lawaw*. The old term for extortion, *diligencia*, has been joined by *kikil* (to chisel) and *arbor* (an anagram of *robar*). *Nakatipak* is to hit the jackpot; and *tipak na tipak* is to be in the chips. Then you can buy *toga* (shoes) a *polo* (shirt) or even a *cana* (coat). . . . And you can go into a restaurant and [*chicha*], eat without having to do the *one-two-three*, which is to flee or *poga* (from the Spanish *fuga*) after eating without paying the bill.⁵⁰

I could go on but will resist the temptation to quote many other similar passages in the essay.

Reading the section above, or better yet reciting it out loud, one gets an acute sense of what Joaquin says are the characteristics of slang: its speed, its spontaneity, and its remarkable capacity to “absorb without fuss” terms from other languages, including Tagalog itself.⁵¹ The speed of slang's transmission, enabled by mass-mediated technologies and the spread of the marketplace, endows even familiar words with a recurring novelty. One senses this in the rhythm of Joaquin's telling. He begins with *barkada* but is quickly off to other words: *atrazo*, *trobol*, *rambol*, *golpehan*, etc. What emerges is a kind of accidental narrative about a *barkada* settling a score or *atrazo*, then getting into trouble with the law or *lespu*, being sent to jail, *Munti*, having to pay off guards and other prisoners with *yosi*, cigarettes or *atik*, money. The last word, *atik*, triggers another chain of associations: earnings, *kita*, extortion, *diligencia*, theft, *arbor*, that in turn opens up another set of linkages: jackpot, *nakatipak*, shoes, *toga*, going out and eating, *chicha*, that leads to several words for drinking, alcoholic drinks, then getting drunk. It is as if in talking about slang, one ends up talking in slang. One is contaminated by its metonymic pull and disdain for linguistic conventions. Like the *barkada* that has to *botak* fast enough from the *lespu* after settling an *atrazo*, slang evades the institutional authorities of home and school. It is impatient to move on, as Joaquin does, jumping from one word to another to string together less a story about the national language than an enactment of its expressive possibilities.

For Constantino, as we saw, miseducation in English impairs thinking by impeding the translation of language into thought. Instead, like American colonial officials, the nationalist bemoans the failure of translation to work properly, that is, to make language, both English and the vernacular, into transparent and servile instruments for the formation of a self in

⁵⁰Ibid., 13–15.

⁵¹Ibid., 3.

control of its own thoughts. Miseducation means that colonial education continues in the postcolonial classroom characterized by the war of translation. In seeking to replace English with Filipino as the more effective medium of instruction, Constantino seeks to win this war—to stop language from posing obstacles to learning by putting an end to the need for translation. Hence, for the nationalist who inherits the colonial legacy, the answer to the war of translation is similar to the latter's: a war on translation.

For Joaquin, by contrast, translation has a different trajectory. In the passages above, Joaquin translates Tagalog slang into English. But as we have seen, the English prose is punctuated and punctured by the speedy and restless appearance of slang to the point where the English sometimes blurs into Tagalog. The power of slang to absorb and displace all languages affects the very language that is seeking to capture and objectify it. English is repeatedly ensnared in slang. Most of the time, Joaquin provides approximate English equivalents to the Tagalog. At other times, the chains of associations move so rapidly as to carry away the English. Freed from the conventions of home and the institutional constraints of school, slang makes possible a way out of the war of and on translation. It turns translation instead into promiscuous and ongoing play. Veering from the serious responsibilities of an officially mandated national language, Joaquin's translation of the language of the streets is underwritten by an ethos of attentiveness to what is new and what passes for new regardless of its provenance or precise meaning. Such is, perhaps, the basis of its literary promise. Translation liberated from the task of reproducing hierarchy is another way of experiencing the nation, whether in its colonial or postcolonial state. This indecorous, vulgar, miseducated nation is one where, for example, vaudeville actors, like *cocheros*, *atsays*, *tinderas*, and *kanto boys*, might take their place alongside academics, politicians, and landlords to give their own treatise on the national language. We get a sense of what this other nation might be like when Joaquin performs a shtick he doubtless learned from his time working as a stagehand in vaudeville productions. It consists of asking:

Did the English language spring from Tagalog? Yes, averred the vaudeville professors; and they point out that many English words have an obvious Tagalog origin—for example, pussy from *pusa*, mother hen from *inahan*. There's something to this theory, really. Those English words, tot and toy—don't they clearly come from *totoy*, the Tagalog for child? And another Tagalog word for tot, *bololoy*—usually shortened to *boloy* or *boboy*—is just as clearly the source for boy. Where would the English suit have sprung from but from our word for wear, *suot*? . . . What pronoun came first: the Tagalog *ito* or the English it? . . . The friction of our *kiskis* undoubtedly sparked kiss, as the laceration of *gasgas* grows bigger in gash, and the dangle of *lushus* swings again in loose, and the sibilance of *sipsip* is scissored in sip. . . . But what need we to go on? Even the English word for nurse, nanny, is obviously a derivative of *nanay*.⁵²

Joaquin carnivalizes the relationship between the imperial and subaltern languages, placing the latter not only on top but at the origin of the former. This reversal,

⁵²*Ibid.*, 17–18.

however, is less about nationalist revenge or *resentiment* as it is about highlighting what Constantino referred to as the masses' "appreciation" for the sound of English—and, we might add, for the sound of any language. The joke here rests on the fact that the vernacular words are neither the semantic equivalents nor the etymological origins of the English. Rather, a series of phonic similarities are made to resonate between the two, loosening the authority of English to delimit the vernacular and vice versa. The two are juxtaposed in the mode of call and response: *kiskis* returns as kiss, *gargas* calls forth gash, *lulus* yields loose, *sispsip* breaks into sip. In retailing this "venerable theory," Joaquin seizes another opportunity to show the literary potential of slang, that which makes it the basis of a national language.⁵³ Such potential, as I have argued, consists of mobilizing the practice of translation as play. It means being alert to the materiality of languages, beginning with their sounds. Translating after a fashion Tagalog into English reveals neither their semantic equivalence nor their relative capacities for civilizing bodies or yielding thought. Rather, as Joaquin shows, it demonstrates their fleeting kinship. As if descended from Tagalog, English, like Spanish, gives up its power to command and order native speech. It becomes instead a kind of relative, perhaps a friend, a *chokaran*, a member of the *barkada* of Tagalog slang. Together they come to share something in common, forming the basis for a kind of national language. *Happy-happy lang!*

⁵³This "venerable theory" of language, one predicated on translation as play, dates back further than the introduction of vaudeville to the Philippines. See, for example, the *awit* or songs of the sixteenth-century *ladino*, or bilingual poet, printer, and translator for Spanish friars, Tomas Pinpin as discussed in Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, *op. cit.* note 21, chap. 2.