

INTRODUCTION

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The Aporia of Translation

Each time we express ourselves, we have to break with ourselves.

—OCTAVIO PAZ, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

I don't know how, or in how many languages, you can translate this word *lécher* when you wish to say that one language licks another, like a flame or a caress.

—JACQUES DERRIDA, "What Is Relevant Translation?"

This book is about the vexed relationship between language and history seen from the perspective of translation practices in the Philippines, the United States, and elsewhere. Crisscrossing various colonial and postcolonial terrains, *Motherless Tongues* explores the ways in which translation has played an important, if overlooked, role in the unfolding and understanding of particular events in the imperial and national sites I examine here. Each chapter is a signpost for mapping those moments where linguistic exchange and historical imagination give rise to one another within the context of persistently uneven, and always contingent, relations of power. By way of introduction, I want to begin by offering a brief narrative of my own linguistic history that is mine by virtue of belonging to others. In a book on the historicity of translation, we might situate such an accounting by asking: who speaks and to whom? By what right and in what idiom? Who or what is the I that addresses *you*, whoever you might be, and how does it come about in this particular language that we share?

Speaking in Tongues

English is neither my first nor my second language, but serves as both. I speak it when I want to speak something else—that which I imagine to be my mother tongue. Thus is English my language to the extent that it comes from and belongs to someone else. This has to do with the accident of my birth, which has consigned me to a double relationship with English. Born in Manila a decade after the Philippines had gained formal independence from three years of Japanese occupation, nearly half a century of U.S. colonization, and about 350 years of Spanish colonial rule, I grew up inhabiting a complicated linguistic landscape where the mother tongue often seemed like the other's tongue. I went to Catholic schools in Manila where the medium of instruction was English. At home, neither of my parents spoke in their respective native languages to any of their four children. Coming from different parts of a country with over one hundred languages, they spoke mutually unintelligible tongues. They communicated with us in the only language they had in common, a second language that they had learned in school: English.

Both my parents had provincial roots and met in Manila after the war. Born in the mid-1920s, theirs was a generation removed from the Revolution of 1896 and the Filipino-American War of 1899–1902. Living under U.S. colonial rule *entre deux guerres*, they attended the colonial public school system, where English was enforced as the medium of instruction, while the vernaculars were repressed and denigrated.¹ My father spoke Ilonggo, while my mother Kapampangan, though she had become fluent in Tagalog, having gone to school in Manila. English was their lingua franca. When I was born in 1956, English had become far more entrenched in the wake of the American victory over the Japanese. Through a series of unequal treaties, the country remained firmly within the economic, military, and political purview of the United States that made it very much a neocolony. The widespread use of English in schools, businesses, and public life testified to the ongoing hegemony of the United States. In the midst of the cultural Cold War, American popular films, music, and television spread throughout the archipelago, increasing the spread of English while investing it with the glamour and power of modernity. In contrast, vernacular languages and Spanish were marginalized in schools and in the public sphere, associated with the uneducated and backward “masses,” in the former case, and with a conservative Church and oligarchy, in the latter.

The dominance of English, however, was far from definitive. It was but one of the many languages that was spoken by my family, both immediate and extended. As the lingua franca for the postwar middle classes, it was spoken in a variety of registers and mixed with other languages and accents. By the 1960s, American R&B broadcast on radio and covered by local bands had insinuated Black English and countercultural slang into the “proper” English we were expected to speak. The very Americanness of English meant that it was itself creolized and pervaded by other modes of speaking. Indeed, early efforts by American schoolteachers and their Filipino successors to rid natives of their accents had consistently failed. English came to be spoken with distinctive regional accents, bearing the stigmata, as it were, of the vernaculars it had sought to exclude.² In our home, the help did not speak English, though they had some understanding of it. My father addressed them in Ilonggo, since they were all from the province of Negros. The kids spoke to them in a mix of Tagalog and English, while they replied in their native tongue, which we understood but could only haltingly speak. My mother eventually learned enough Ilonggo to give orders to the help and, just as importantly, to communicate with her mother-in-law, who, having only had minimal schooling, spoke no other language when she came to visit us along with other Bacolod relatives. With my maternal grandfather, after whom I was named, I would speak in Tagalog and English. Born during the year of the Revolution of 1896, he was fluent in Spanish, having gone to a Jesuit school and then law school where Spanish was required since it was still the dominant language of the courts and the Philippine legislature until 1941. With my mother and her sisters, he switched between Kapampangan, Tagalog, and English.

As a child, I recall spending humid afternoons reading the Ilonggo-language magazine, *Hiligaynon*, kept both by the help and my grandmother before I could even read Tagalog. In the middle-class subdivision where we lived, we also had Chinese neighbors. With their kids, we spoke in a mix of Tagalog and English, even as they would intersperse their conversation with Hokkien cuss words that all the neighborhood kids avidly learned. While Hollywood movies were predominant in the postwar era, the first film I remember seeing was in Tagalog, *Captain Barbel*, which starred the Chinese mestizo comedian Dolphy, with my Ilonggo-speaking grandmother in downtown Manila. And while American shows like *Combat* and *Bonanza* dominated the early days of television in the Philippines, locally produced variety

shows were just as popular, which, along with local films, radio, comics, and tabloids, trafficked in the rapidly evolving urban creole, Taglish.³

The linguistic scene in private schools in Manila was similarly complex. English ruled, but everyone was required to take several units of Spanish, which was taught badly so that very few learned it properly, while Tagalog—or Filipino, as it would be eventually to be called—was taught as a stand-alone subject and so effectively marginalized. Speaking the vernacular was still discouraged, and at some schools, it was not uncommon to be fined a small amount if caught speaking it on school premises. Yet the practice of rampant code-switching among the vernaculars, English, and, at times, Spanish, ran beneath and through the American English that was meant to be the standard medium of instruction. *Conyo*-speak, *collegiala* talk, Arneo accents, at times laced with Hokkien and Hakka terms that seeped out of Chinese-language schools, particularized the class character of the chatter that came out of these institutions.⁴ By the 1960s, there also emerged a distinctive gay *argot* that found its way into popular culture, promiscuously coupling terms from the various vernaculars, bending the grammatical limits of English and Spanish, while occasionally spicing things up with bastardized words from French and German. Adding to this inter- and intralinguistic Babel was the Catholic Church. Attending mass before the days of Vatican II meant hearing it in Latin. As an aspiring—and ultimately, failed—altar boy, I memorized the liturgy in Latin but understood only fragments of what I was saying. I was fascinated by the sonorous syllables and grave tones of a language whose power, like the pig Latin inscribed on the *anting-anting* or amulets sold in stalls outside some churches, came directly from their otherworldly opaqueness.⁵

In high school, my economics teacher introduced me to Marx. He was then a member of the Communist Party youth group *Kabataang Makabayan* (Patriotic Youth) and led me to a world of left-wing activism that had its own set of codes. I encountered dense English translations of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist literature, full of weighty terms like *dialectical materialism*, *imperialism*, and *bureaucrat-capitalism*. Other words, like *puppets* and *running dogs*, were re-codified as weapons of condemnation rather than terms of endearment.⁶ At the same time, activist life also brought with it a whole new way of hearing and speaking Tagalog. Coming from the streets the vernacular took on an electric energy, spoken in ways that were lively, inventive, and full of trenchant humor critical of authority. A giddy sense of defiance connected

youthful participants in demonstrations as they felt themselves traversed by chants like “Makibaka, huwag matakot!” (Fight, don’t fear!). Chanting our slogans, we marched in the streets to their distinctive rhythm. Every demonstration would climax with the anthem of the global left, the “Internationale,” sung with clenched fists in Tagalog, evoking deep feelings of solidarity.⁷

Such is a condensed inventory of my linguistic legacy: the privilege of American English punctured and punctuated by a variety of vernaculars: Tagalog, Ilonggo, Kapampangan, bits and pieces of Hokkien, Hakka, Spanish, and Latin. The garrulous and swiftly changing idioms of creole Taglish, gay-speak, private school talk, and Marxist-Maoist jargon woven into the black vernacular and bohemian lexicon of American pop culture of the 1960s—all of which were pronounced with different regional accents—further added to this dizzying diversity. Hence, whenever I am asked what my native language is, I always hesitate to respond. I cannot point to a single one without feeling that I might be betraying the others.

It is thus that I share the fate of many other Filipinos both in the Philippines and elsewhere in the world when I say—this I that now addresses you in an English that doesn’t belong to it—that I have no mother tongue, or rather that I have many mother tongues. Whatever I happen to be speaking at the moment is always commingled and contaminated with a whole train of other languages I grew up speaking and hearing in the past and to this very day. Whenever I speak or write in what seems to be coherent English, it is only because I have managed to momentarily repress this history of linguistic pluralism. It is a repression that amounts to an act of translation, transforming a train of possible expressions into a grammatically correct and stylistically recognizable discourse. For to inhabit multiple mother tongues means that speaking any one language entails translating not only across different languages but also within the same language insofar as they are spoken in different ways in different contexts. Inter- and intralingual translation defines the condition of speaking any language in the Philippines—and perhaps elsewhere. My language is thus one that is already of and from the other.⁸

But who is this other? And who is the I that addresses and is addressed by it? How do they come about in the process of addressing each other, and how do they come apart?

Pronouns and Persons

Emile Benveniste many years ago wrote about the peculiarity of the first- and second-person pronouns. In and of themselves, they have no referents except in their actual use, for example, when I say *I* to refer to myself. In other words, *I* takes on meaning only at the moment that it is spoken or written by someone and, as Benveniste stresses, always in relation to the second person, *you*. A language without personal pronouns, he says, is impossible to imagine. By generating the category of persons, pronouns posit the sense of subjectivity—of one who speaks and is spoken to—and makes possible linguistic communication as a means for referring to the world:

I use “*I*” only when I am speaking to someone who will be a “*you*” in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of the person, for it implies reciprocally “*I*” becomes “*you*” in the address of the one who in turn designates himself as “*I*.” Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as “*I*” in his discourse. Because of this, “*I*” posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to “*me*,” becomes my echo to whom I say “*you*” and who says “*you*” to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition of language.⁹

Following Benveniste, every time I say *I*, it is to address a *you* who in turn addresses me as another *I*. Both are mutually entangled with and inhabited by one another. I express myself, as Octavio Paz says, only by breaking with myself. My identity comes not from being the same but from differing, drifting, and detouring, always intermediate and interconnected: always addressing, addressed by, and becoming, in turn, a *you*. It takes its singularity from the historically specific ways by which it has been doubled and bounded, repeatedly opened, and often violently dispersed, over time. The personal pronouns *I* and *you* designate not just the self who speaks and the other who is addressed; they also posit the dialogical relationship between the two. The “person” is that which is formed in and through this interminable dialogue. Put differently, the reciprocal relationship between *I* and *you* constitutive of the person means that *I* emerge as one who is always already in transition, on the way to being other than who *I* am. In this way *I* can say “*I*” by virtue of being an effect of translating within the same language, and

between language and a social world, which, insofar as it is a world, must be historical in the sense of being constructed and contingent.

Language can exist as a means of communication, Benveniste says, only because it establishes “the category of the person,” which, as we saw, comes from the reciprocal, translative relationship between *I* and *you*. If language without personal pronouns were unimaginable, then it would also be unusable without translation that characterizes the reciprocal relationship between the first and the second person.¹⁰

But what if, as in my case that is doubtless analogous to many others, *I* and *you* occur in two or more languages rather than within the same one? As Abdelkebir Khatibi asks, “When I speak to you in your language, what happens to mine? Does my language continue to speak, but in silence?” What happens to the *I* that says “*I*” across languages? How does it manage to reach a *you*, and can it always count on a response? What risks does it run, what debts does it incur? And what of the native tongue, if there is one? Left behind, how does it continue to speak, if it speaks at all, in the face and space of another language? Is there a certain “illusory power,” even “madness” in thinking it is possible to speak as a different *I* capable of addressing a *you* and being addressed in turn across a linguistic divide?¹¹ Inasmuch as the *I* emerges by speaking otherwise under conditions of translation, is there ever a way that it can control the power that constitutes it? Can *I*, once it speaks, ever use the power of translation to step outside of it? How, in the first place, can we understand this power?

Translation and Power

To be constituted in and through translation means that one is compelled to address not just the topics or objects under consideration, but also the means for and modes of addressing them. Roman Jakobson once referred to this discourse on discourse as metalanguage. It is that which comes after the fact of speech in order to explain or interpret what one has just said.¹² “A faculty of speaking a given language implies a faculty of talking about this language. Such ‘metalinguistic’ operation permits revision and redefinition of the vocabulary used.”¹³ A metalanguage is thus a medium for meditating upon mediation and mediumship, allowing you to reflect on reflection. Metalanguage is, in this sense, not metaphysical at all. It is

not the truth that precedes and transcends language, but precisely a kind of speech that comes after the fact of speech acts. It asks not only about the *what* of a statement but also the *how* and the *who*. It is in this sense secondary and belated, supplementing what has been said, but it is itself always liable to more explanation, generating more supplementation, and so on, around the hermeneutic circle.

Metalinguistic operations, according to Jakobson, are akin to the act of translation insofar as it supplements the original. Betraying, in both senses of that word, the original, translation exceeds or falls short of its task. It invariably proves incapable of providing the exact equivalence of the substance and style of one language in another. The translator thus always incurs a debt to the original. He or she is always seeking to make restitution to make up for what is missing in the translation, which, because of its inherent shortcomings, comes across like a “series of unfavorable currency transactions.”¹⁴ Just as metalanguage conveys what is said by deferring its full disclosure, so translation reconstitutes the original by shortchanging now its meaning, now its style, and usually both at the same time. “In these conditions,” Jakobson says, “the question of translation becomes much more entangled and controversial.”¹⁵

These “entangled and controversial”—which is to say, aporetic—workings of translation are what I hope emerge in the chapters that follow. Their geographical and temporal locus shifts between the United States, the Philippines, and elsewhere, beyond their national boundaries from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the last few years of the twenty-first. Written for separate occasions and diverse audiences, each chapter plays out a set of questions held together by recurring obsessions about the politics of language and the ethics and pragmatics of translation. These emerge in various locations and moments: chiefly in the imperial and nationalist languages of sovereignty, the war-making and interpretive protocols of counterinsurgency, the class struggles over technologies of communication with which to address a corrupt state, and in autobiography as sites for dramatizing cultural, as well as linguistic translation. The hegemony of American English in global wars and colonial classrooms is taken up alongside the linguistic predicaments of postcolonial nostalgia and nationalist anxieties over authority and authorship. In each case, acts of translation are further complicated by linguistic histories and social practices that exceed conventional limits: the agency of accident in area studies, the recalcitrance

of vernacular notions of freedom, the play of slang under neocolonial conditions, the messianic discourse of crowds seeking justice, the highly unstable identities of interpreters in the midst of military occupation, and the inaccessibility of the dead to nostalgic and nationalist recuperations, among other things.

It is this play between translation and what resists, yet calls out for it, that runs through the entire book. Often forced to serve as the instrument of an imperializing or nationalizing power, translation in these pages is also underwritten by the recurrence of mistranslations and the persistence of untranslatability.¹⁶ In doing so, histories of translation reveal not only the structuring logics of colonial powers; they also reopen the regions of linguistic pluralism that have been repressed. The responses to the reappearance of linguistic plurality and their speakers are as various as they are uneven. A dominant reaction has been to instrumentalize language as such: to use translation, for example, to domesticate foreign languages as well as the foreignness that inheres in language itself. Such entails the mastery of one language over others, and the regulation and standardization of the play of speech. Put differently, attempts at linguistic and social domination seek to recruit translation as a means for waging war on the complications within, as well as across, languages. But such wars of translation are never unchallenged. As I seek to demonstrate, there is an irreducibly insurgent element in every language that undermines such attempts at mastery. In the wars of, and on, translation, what emerge are multiply mothered and motherless tongues amid shifting zones of untranslatability.

What, then, does this insurgency of language consist of? And how does it figure in the relationship between translation and history? Let us return briefly to Jakobson. He says, “A faculty of speaking a given language implies a faculty of talking about this language.” This “faculty” is, as I have suggested, the faculty of translation, allowing one to move within, as well as across, languages. It is the capacity to speak otherwise, to say what one meant to say after having said it, to explain what one had just tried to explain, over and over, if need be. It is thus an ability to translate repeatedly, to take hold of language in order to talk about language not just here and now, but into a future that eludes final determination.

It is worth noting that this faculty to translate “a given language” implies that language is already given. In other words, we encounter language as a kind of gift. It is there, available and waiting before one arrives to speak

it inasmuch as it is always already being spoken by others.¹⁷ This observation supplements and extends Benveniste's argument that it is "the condition of intersubjectivity that alone makes linguistic communication possible."¹⁸ Subtending the social, language becomes historical only when it is spoken—translated by countless other speakers, who, in order to speak it, have to be able to repeat its structure and vocabulary, that is, to translate it from the start. And doing so means having already been subjected to the process of translation as the condition of possibility of speech. Coming before communication, language, once spoken, plunges its speakers into an "imagined community."¹⁹

One such enduringly powerful and globalized imagined community is undoubtedly that of Western Christianity. Institutionally and ideologically, it has arguably been an enabling and critical feature, along with capitalism, of Western imperialism. It is also an elementary aspect of "Western" civilization and civilizational discourse that, thanks to colonialism, has spread across the planet and affected even the most un-Christian and secular of societies.²⁰ In the context of Christianity, where everything has always already begun with the Word, the notion of language as a gift remains central. As a gift, however, language is neither free nor is its circulation unrestricted. Rather, it is imagined as the coming of a divine fire that is meant to burn and consume all other languages in the process of making them bear the language of God.

This imperializing theory of translation is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the event of the Pentecost. The Holy Ghost visits the Apostles in the wake of Christ's return to heaven, appearing as tongues of fire over their heads, empowering them to speak not just their language but all other languages in the world. "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."²¹ Receiving the promise of the Spirit, the Apostles, and all the other missionaries—religious, colonial, national, and otherwise that arrive in their wake—come to believe in their authority to preach the Word in all the words of the world. Translation and Truth thus become irrevocably linked so that bearing witness entails speaking in tongues, but only insofar as the latter is believed to come from and return to the self-same Word. Endowed with the gift of translation, the Apostles can transfer and transport the Word of God across all the other languages. Thus does conversion

always require translation.²² Converts gain the “faculty of speaking” not just a given language but also the very gift of language. In so doing, they convert their speech into prayers seeking the mercy and blessings of God with which to gain salvation.

The given language brings with it the gift of translation (and vice versa) according to this still dominant Western Christian tradition and its various secular colonial and nationalist versions. As a gift whose origin transcends the world of its speakers, the faculty of translation is determined in a particular way: as that which reorders linguistic plurality into a linguistic hierarchy—the Word of God on top, followed by languages of rule, then all other languages on the bottom—issuing from and returning to its One True Source. Thanks to translation, all languages are conscripted to secure the relationship between signs and referents, bodies and souls, history and destiny, mortality and immortality, whereby the former is made to yield to the latter by the coming of the Word. The Word comes to conquer all words and remake them into aspects of the ever-repeatable promise of salvation retraced by the ever-renewable instruments of prayer and ritual that will bring down grace from above to those below.²³ Thanks to prayer, a social hierarchy is erected on the basis of a linguistic hierarchy. Prayer as the privileged form of address entails the ceaseless petitioning of God across the infinite distance that separates Him from His people. It is precisely the role of prayer and the language of rituals to translate—that is, to both bridge and maintain that divide—between God and man inasmuch as its definitive crossing is possible only upon death. Indeed, death itself is reconceptualized by the language of conversion, sanctified as the decisive translation of earthly life into an afterlife, of infinity into eternity, either in heaven or in hell.²⁴

Translation in this Western Christian sense rehearses the transit from life to the afterlife. What lies beyond living, no one really knows. No one can speak of it except speculatively, in anticipation of what is to come: perhaps the final reckoning, the arrival of divine justice, the end of the world as we, whoever we are, know it. But whatever it is, it will no doubt bring the end of translation and linguistic transfers, since there will be no other there to transfer to. Thus would the end of translation bring about the end of the faculty of speech altogether. It would consequently be the end of the other from whom I derive and to whom I direct my speech. The tongues of fire would not only lick all other tongues, as Derrida’s epigraph suggests, but also consume them in a holocaust of eternal conflagration.²⁵

However, Jakobson also says that there are types of discourses that readily take exception to what I have characterized as Christianity's apocalyptic fantasies of translation. Such other discourses persistently defy direct annexation or conversion either within the same or across different languages and media. These include poetry, jokes, dreams, magic, and other sorts of "everyday verbal mythology."²⁶ In such cases, form and content are co-constitutive just as meaning and style are inseparable. Neither "free" nor "literal" translation will do, neither "word for word" nor "sense for sense."²⁷ Instead, what emerges is a condition of untranslatability, whereby the question of translation becomes ever more "entangled and controversial." Becoming entangled, the faculty of translation is trapped by language that seems to yield to no definitive explication or just exchange. One who translates poetry, for example, finds himself or herself immersed in "grammatical categories [that] carry a high semantic import," whereby, for example, *death* is gendered feminine in Russian but masculine in German. Similarly, efforts to translate metaphors and puns threaten to erect "skyscrapers of footnotes" as the translator endlessly seeks to restore the sense or the style robbed from the original.²⁸ Attempting to deal with the essential untranslatability of these discourses, one is plunged into a sea of possible translations, making any single one a betrayal of the original. Translation thus exposes us to the fact that "language itself is an ocean alive with aporia."²⁹

Elusiveness Made Flesh

What could this mean, that language is "alive with aporia"? What kind of life, linguistic and otherwise, dwells in aporia? How is it different from the afterlife projected by Christianity and its secular avatars? From the Greek *aporos*, Latinized as *aporia*, the word is defined by the OED as "an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument or theory," as in, famously, "a Cretan declares all Cretans to be liars." But in Greek, it also means "impasse," "lack of resources" (that is, without *poros*), and "puzzlement." Aporia is thus a site that prevents passage, blocks progress, and arrests movement from one place to another. As Sarah Kofman points out, Plato and other Greek philosophers have often referred to the sea as the aporetic space par excellence, with its "endless realm of pure movement, the most mobile, changeable and polymorphous of all spaces, a space where any way that has been traced is immediately obliterated, which transforms

any journey into a voyage of exploration which is always unprecedented, dangerous and uncertain.”³⁰ Hence to engage in discursive exchange is to risk drowning in the sea of its aporetic movements. It is to plunge into a “storm of difficulties” that threatens to erode distinctions and divisions, upend authority, and unsettle beliefs.³¹ So, too, with translation, which draws one into a sea of languages, entrapping one in their multitude of referents and their ever-changing currents of meaning. Indeed, the only way out of this aporia of language is, ironically, language itself. One translates in the hope of finding a way out—poros—of the trap of language, but only by recourse to another language. One tries to get beyond aporia but, as in the metalinguistic scene described by Jakobson, ends up deeper in another aporia.

In Plato’s work, the Sophists are usually blamed for being the chief purveyors of aporia, with their fondness for “techniques of disorientation” that threaten the authority of the philosopher. As weavers of enigma (from the Greek, meaning a fishing net, a woven basket) Sophists are accused of being “living snares . . . mottled, polymorphous and hydra-headed,” who, as Kofman says, “cannot be placed in any category. . . . Their form is ambiguous . . . elusiveness made flesh, as bizarre and as dangerous as the ‘mad becoming.’”³² Just as worrisome to the philosopher are the youth, who, upon discovering aporia, rejoice and use it against their parents and other figures of authority. In Plato’s *Philebus* we read:

As soon as a young man gets wind of this feature of speech, he is delighted: he feels he has discovered a treasure-trove of ingenuity. He is in his seventh heaven, and he loves to worry every sentence, now shaking it to and fro and lumping it together, now rolling it out again and again, and tearing it apart. Above all, he confuses himself, but he also confuses anyone he ever comes across, be he younger, older or the same age as himself. He spares neither his father nor his mother, nor anything which can hear—not even animals escape, let alone men. He wouldn’t have mercy on the foreigner, if only he could get hold of an interpreter.³³

Like the Sophists, the youth delight in aporia. It affords them a way out of the trap of parental authority. It gives to them a language that is irreducibly material rather than an empty vessel for containing and giving out meaning: they can shake it, lump it together, roll it out over and over again. Aporitic language thus becomes an occasion for engaging in play, producing de-

light among the youth, especially when it comes at the expense of their parents. But they also target others, such as animals and foreigners, and do not spare even themselves. They, too, are ensnared in the movement of language and neither give nor ask for “mercy.” Unlike the quasi-Platonic Christian notion of translation, which entails the Word transiting into all other words and converting them into ordered relays with which to ask for mercy from above, the youth, in seizing upon aporia, refuse to grant or plea for mercy.³⁴ Irreverent and free from guilt, they do not ask forgiveness from a higher figure. For the youth, then, playing with language is a way of translating it, not in order to escape it but rather to become ever more enfolded into it. Thus do they embrace the insurgency of language, its capacity to resist reduction and conversion into definitive meanings and authoritative intentions. Like the Sophists, the youth experience aporia as the joy of interminable translation, the experience of being in between different and incommensurable states. In this sense, both foreshadow some of the responses of other historical agents—colonized peoples, working classes, and other subordinated groups—who, as we shall see, had been enmeshed in the language of colonizing power even as they wove their own traps to reverse and displace this power’s hold.

Entangled Motifs: Overview of the Book

Each chapter in this book takes up the constitutive, transformative, and often disruptive workings of translation within specific historical contexts. Part I deals mainly with the colonial and postcolonial Philippines, highlighting the plurality of languages—vernacular, Spanish, and English—that shape not only the representation of events but also their very enactment. Part II focuses on the United States and approaches linguistic plurality from another angle, by interrogating the putative monolingualism of the U.S. nation and empire, and by showing how American English is itself the effect of a history of translation practices. Linguistic differences in both places require translation as the process from which issue imagination and action. Filipino nationalists and revolutionary fighters inflect the notion of sovereignty and independence from the West, translating them into vernacularized Christian idioms of pity and compassion (chapter 1). The U.S. military and policymakers seize upon language as a weapon and reformulate translation as part of a Cold War liberal project of area studies or, in the

midst of the “global war on terror,” as part of a “complex weapons system” (chapter 4). In both cases, English plays an important role. In American efforts at counterinsurgency, it is installed at the apex of a linguistic hierarchy in reference to which all other languages become legible, while in Filipino nationalist writing, English is invested with a demonic power to enslave minds and distort the culture of a people to the point of hastening its death (chapter 2).

In other instances, the proclamation of Philippine independence in 1898 in Spanish—the language of the nationalist elite—shows not an iteration of the Enlightenment ideal of equality and fraternity but their retranslation into colonial notions of hierarchy and dependency, suggesting the beginnings of a counterrevolutionary regime (chapter 1). Other chapters (3 and 5) focus on the telecommunicative workings of translation, that is, its ability to communicate at a distance across social and geographic divides. It is this mediating power of translation materialized in cell phones and weapons, text messages and drones, that leads both the U.S. military and the Filipino middle class in the early twenty-first century to seek control of its workings for their own specific purposes. For the Filipino bourgeoisie seeking to oust a corrupt president at the dawn of the twenty-first century, controlling translation involved using cell phones and the language of texting to surpass and direct the crowds of Manila in order to speak directly to the state (chapter 3). For the U.S. military, attempts to develop automatic translation systems and mechanize the protocols for interpreters in the wake of the attacks of 9/11 led to destructive fantasies of direct communication with enemy insurgents and the population alike. And where the history of American area studies has privileged the role of foreign language-learning to gain knowledge of, and power over, the non-American world during the Cold War (chapter 4), Filipino vernacular languages extend the insurgent war against colonial education that was originally conceived as a counter-insurgent measure to end the Filipino-American War (chapter 2).

Indeed, the relationship between war and translation pervades many of the chapters in this book. Because translation is predicated on the inevitability of mistranslation, it spawns undecidability, ambivalence, and, at times, violent misinterpretations. By revealing the intractability of linguistic plurality, and therefore the radical irreducibility of languages to one another, translation tends to become a kind of war and, in the context of revolution and military occupation, to instigate and intensify conflict (chapters

1, 2, 4, and 5). However, this ongoing war of translation and the recurrence of untranslatability also occur alongside linguistic play and the proliferation of differences that cannot be politically or ideologically contained. We get a sense of this excess, for instance, in the sections that track the unstable workings of American English: its promiscuous mixing with Tagalog in Philippine postwar street slang (chapter 2), its uncanny idiomatic workings within the official discourse in a U.S. counterinsurgency manual, and its interlinear translation of Pashto in reports of civilian deaths caused by American missiles in Afghanistan (chapter 5). These chapters thus allow us to glimpse some of the ways language escapes the commands of empires and nations, resisting their reduction into mere instruments of domination.

The insurgency of language and the wars of translation thus produce unexpected and unsettling sociohistorical effects. These are further dramatized in (auto)biographical writing, the subject of part III. What is the relationship between translation and biography? The word *biography*, literally “the writing of a life,” indicates something of the way language always figures in rendering the singularity of each and every life. Conventional biographies often regard lives as retrospectively meaningful: seen from the vantage point of the present, the fragmentary and uncertain progression of a life can be redrawn to seem as if it had always followed a certain design, leading up to the moment of its recollection. But one can also think of how lives unfold according to a series of accidents, of events unforeseen and unmotivated, which remain resistant to explanation, yet beg for explication. It is this radical contingency at the foundation of each and every life that spurs the transformation—we might say, translation—of one into something other than what one had anticipated. One encounters others at the same time that one discovers in oneself the workings of a certain otherness—of a difference that calls for expression and acknowledgment if it is to take on a social reality. How do we know this?

The discovery and expression of otherness are evident in the flow of desire. Entwined with desire, this otherness—the *you* that, in its response, constitutes the *I* and which the *I* seeks, in turn, to address—never quite arrives. It is precisely this otherness, both inside and outside of oneself—indeed, one that comes before there is even a sense of the inside and the outside, much less of a self—that translation promises to bring forth. But just as every translation is essentially incomplete, the arrival of otherness will always be deferred, disguised, and displaced. Although the word *translation* rarely

appears in chapters 6 and 7, it is in fact implied throughout my discussion of the accidental formation of agency in and through encounters with alterity. In the last two chapters, 8 and 9, the link between biography and translation in relation to untranslatability and contingency becomes more explicit.

The contingent workings and unexpected outcomes of translation are clearly evident in the practices of area studies. In the personal accounts of those who have engaged in a study of other places and peoples, we hear histories of suddenly becoming foreign. For example, Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai retrace the origins of their scholarly interests in accidental encounters with unknown peoples and imported objects, decisively recasting their lives into one of ongoing translation, both cultural and linguistic (chapter 6). They show how autobiographies are about self-becoming only to the extent that they entail being and speaking otherwise while relying on some narrative about translation that obscures as much as it reveals the enduring recalcitrance of language as such.

In Renato Rosaldo's and Reynaldo Ileto's respective recollections of the political and cultural conditions of their lives and works, they, too, find themselves enmeshed in the aporias of translation. We see this in the various accounts of Rosaldo as he navigates between the rhetoric of a colonial-popular discourse on "savages," the recovered notes of his late wife's ethnographic description of Ilongot mourning, the unspeakability of his own grief conjoined to the memory of loss, and the sudden mechanical return of the voices of natives preparing to hunt heads after the practice had been outlawed (chapter 7). In Ileto's magisterial account of Tagalog popular movements, we witness how English and Tagalog are juxtaposed in a relationship of translation, indicating how attention to linguistic complexity and the politics of language can shed light on aspirations for freedom emanating from mid-nineteenth to early twentieth-century peasant groups (chapter 8). These linguistic matters, however, are deflected in his later autobiographical writings into generational and gendered anxieties regarding nationalist authority and authorial control over the history of the "unfinished revolution." Finally, my own interview in chapter 9 reprises many of these questions about authority and biography in the context of the interminable demands of and for translation. It returns us to the question of the *I* that speaks and stutters its responses to *Translation*, both the journal, as well as the phenomenon.

Taken as a whole, *Motherless Tongues* seeks to contribute not only to a his-

tory and theory of translation studies but also to the comparative understanding of historical imagination, especially in the midst of what remains of post–Cold War area studies and the endless “war on terror.” Such is possible to the extent that we think of imagination itself as both the agent and effect of translation practices broadly conceived. At the same time, the ongoing process of supplementation—those “metalinguistic operations” constitutive of translation—suggests that the commerce among languages prepares for, and permeates, the coming of events. By allowing us to say more about the eventfulness of events, it also brings us to say something other and different from what is given, including, for example, the authority of imperial gifts—whether from Christianity or its secular avatars such as the U.S. military—and the hierarchy of signs and indebtedness they bring. Put differently, acts of translation that register the untranslatability of language allow us to reckon with ideologies that reduce translation and languages into mere instruments of conversion, colonial conquest, and social control.

Here then lies the larger, though largely implied, stakes of *Motherless Tongues*. It is arguably this linguistic commerce, at once powerful and insurgent, that keeps open both our understanding and experience of what is historical, of what it means to live on, to survive in view of the radical contingency of what comes. Like the sea of discourse that Plato at once welcomed and feared, it underwrites ongoing interpretations where no one has the first or last word. What emerges in the aporias of translation is a kind of semantic *bouleversement*, the sense of upheaval whereby the endlessly enfolded meanings of particular events will always make any discourse feel unfinished and incomplete. They thus persist as sources of continuous bewilderment in need of further explication, calling forth imaginative revisions. It is the imperative for such revisions, I hazard, that lends to a historical imagination steeped in translation an irreducibly democratic aspect. Just as the insurgency of language ensures the future of translation, so the contradictions and contaminations of translation hold out hope for democratizing historical imagination. Both, as I try to show, make room for dissenting voices, counternarratives, and alternative interpretations from unexpected and often repressed sources speaking in a variety of tongues. And in addressing us, perhaps such tongues, at once motherless and mutant, might help us, whoever we are, find a *poros*—some way out of the aporetic violence, the endless wars, and the tortured lives of this common imperial moment.³⁵