

Preface to the Paperback Edition

Grammar is politics by other means.—Donna Haraway

This book is about the uneasy relationship between translation and conversion in the Spanish colonization of the Tagalogs of the Philippines from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. The coherence of this work, however, emerges in relation to the contemporary condition of post-coloniality; that is, the history peculiar to the late twentieth century of the simultaneous departures and arrivals, multiple entries, unequal migrations, border crossings, and mobile dwellings that have characterized the implosion of the “third world” into the “first.” To the extent that it is written within this historical moment, this book may be regarded as a modest attempt at engaging the implications and enacting the hopes contained in recent calls for a postcolonial historiography. What is at stake in writing about early Tagalog colonial society as a site for understanding the specific articulation of a colonial discourse from a postcolonial location?

In an essay on postcolonial historiography, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes about the need to “provincialize” our understanding of Europe. Such a project would begin by

document[ing] how—through what historical process, [Enlightenment] “reason,” which was not always self-evident to everyone, has been made to look “obvious” far beyond the ground where it originated. If a language, as has been said, is but a dialect backed up by an army, the same could be said of the narratives of “modernity” that, almost universally today, point to a certain “Europe” as the primary habitus of the modern.¹

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?,” *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 1–26. All further references appear in the main text.

Chakrabarty is one of the more prominent members of the Subaltern Studies group composed of scholars based in Indian, British, North American, and Australian aca-

Chakrabarty goes on to suggest that the emergence of “modernity” as such cannot be dissociated from the history of European imperialism. But equally crucial is the collaboration of “third world nationalisms” in the formation and consolidation of Europe as the presumed home of all things modern. As the imagined source and arbiter of modernity, the history of the “Occident” comes to serve as the grammar with which to speak of diverse non-European histories. Ordered by the syntax of colonial discourse, narratives of national histories in the non-Western world cannot but reposition the “West” as the locus of their address: the guarantor, albeit a negative one, of their coherence. Hence, “Indian,” “Chinese,” or “Philippine” histories in all their empirical differences are discursively reduced to the terms of Western historiography as “societies” or “states” which are “developing,” “democratic,” “authoritarian,” “socialist,” and so forth. And those who write about these societies within the global imaginary of Western academic institutions—whatever their national, gender, or ethnic affiliations—are constrained to employ these categories, however critically, in order to appear reasonable and thus legitimate within and beyond their own particular contexts.

By contrast, the project of provincializing Europe entails a critique not only of the universalizing claims of modernity but also the naturalizing demands of nationality. Situated on the borders of the imperial and the national, postcolonial historiography is thus committed to a double task. On one hand, it seeks to reconstruct the network of power relations—the dialectic of coercion and complicity, violence and idealism—that binds colonizers to colonized, the nation-state to the people, and a “modern Europe” to an always yet-to-be-modernized “nonEurope.” On the other hand, it is

demic institutions concerned with writing post-foundational and post-Orientalist histories of “India.” In doing so, they have sought to employ and rethink European critical theory in ways that disrupt and unsettle essentialist categories which tend to dominate Orientalist, nationalist, Marxist, and “world historical” accounts of India. Located both within and outside of “India” and “Europe,” their writings have been extremely enabling for doing postcolonial histories of other areas of the “third world.” For a succinct and incisive discussion of the Subaltern Studies group, see Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories in the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (April 1990): 383–408, and the lively polemical exchanges that stemmed from this essay in Rosalin O’Hanlon and David Washbrook, “After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World,” and Gyan Prakash, “Can the ‘Subaltern’ Ride? A Reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook,” both in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (January 1992): 141–167 and 168–184 respectively. See also Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ed., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

also concerned with tracking that which remains eccentric to and excessive of these binary relations, “resist[ing] and escap[ing] . . . translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous.” (p. 23)

To provincialize Europe along with its formerly colonized, now nationalized others amounts not only to decentering and redrawing the geography of modernity, but also the excavation of notions of otherness in specific historical contexts. In these pages, this double project is played out through a sustained inquiry into the tight weave among practices of translation, the ideology of conquest, the rhetorical economies of conversion, confession, and reciprocity, and the contest over constructions of “natives,” “Castilian,” “spirits,” and “death” as I draw attention to the shifting modes of authority, submission, and resistance among colonizers and colonized. Thus does this book share in the complex movement of postcolonial writings; its highly local and historically specific focus makes sense only in relation to the translocal and broadly comparative sites of its articulation. Indeed, one of the underlying (and perhaps fatal) conceits of this book is that its selective and partial history of Spanish-Tagalog encounters addresses, however haltingly, other moments and other spaces of the postcolonial terrain. And that such is possible to the extent that this book, in its concern with the intersection between signifying practices and power relations, is as much about a crucial event in Philippine history as it is about problematizing the European provenance of modernity. For in asking about the local workings of translation and conversion I also seek to understand the transformation of notions of the “local” amid the dislocations of the colonial.

Something of the tension between the local and the colonial is suggested by the frontispiece of a seventeenth-century Augustinian account of the Philippine Islands entitled, appropriately enough, *Conquistas de las islas filipinas*.² The dual nature of colonization, that is, its spiritual and material aspects, is represented by the neat convergence of the agents of the crown and those of the cross over a map of the archipelago. Assuming a position outside and beyond the islands, the colonizers strike their pose: a hand raising a host to heaven, a finger pointing out the seas and earth below. In doing so, they convey the rays of the Divine Sun that illuminate this scene

2. Fray Gaspar de San Agustín, *Conquistas de las islas filipinas, por las armas del señor Don Phelipe Segundo y Prudente; y la Espiritual, por los religiosos del orden de Nuestro Padre San Agustín . . .*, Madrid: Manuel Ruiz de Morga, 1698. Reprinted with an introduction and annotations by Manuel Merino, O.S.A., Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1975.



Frontispiece from *Conquistas de las islas filipinas*.

of conquest. However, the appearance of God's light differs remarkably from that of the archipelago. Where the former is filled with Biblical inscriptions in Latin, the latter come across as blank spaces, ready to take on the traces of the Divine Sign. In rendering visible the scene of conquest, God's light also effaces the specificity of the islands and their inhabitants.

This illustration lends to colonization the sense of having been a discursive event. It is as if *Las islas filipinas* is spoken into existence by Christian texts as these are translated by the figures of colonial authority. Yoked to evangelization and colonial administration, translation produces a field of communicative practices. Yet, the source and agents of translation appear to be outside this field, untouched by and sovereign from the signifying and political practices they have unleashed. In colonialism then, the "local" is that which is produced by a transcendent discourse: after the fact of conquest. Nonetheless, the fact of conquest must itself be located. It requires translation into an allegory of dual conquest (which in turn is translated by the text of the Augustinian account) in order to pass into posterity. Similarly, the Divine Sun, in order to be known, necessitates the mediation of signs and the incarnate form of language. As the effect of translation, the local is also the site for engendering the sense of the colonial and the cosmic. For the Spaniards, then, the colony may have been a provisional instance in the progress of Providential history. But it also inescapably entailed the provincialization of an imperialist order which, in stretching halfway across the globe, was contingent on the transaction of radically distinct languages, bodies, and material objects among colonizers and colonized. Rather than a static place, the local (as if to foreshadow the postcolonial) turns out to have shifting spatial and temporal boundaries; a nexus of asymmetrical exchanges, conflictual interests, and multiple histories joined, in this particular instance, by a vernacular of religious conversion.

It is the contentious construction and uneven appropriations of this vernacular of conversion predicated on the conversion of vernacular practices that I take up throughout this book. Rather than rehearse that history here, I want instead to briefly address the style of reading that I have brought to bear on the vernacular documents—both Castilian and Tagalog as these are positioned within the grammatical grid of God's language—that figure prominently in this study. My own situation as a postcolonial subject—that is, a first-generation Tagalog/Filipino-American male scholar writing within the shifting and contested disciplinary boundaries of the U.S. academy in the late twentieth century—in part has determined the ways in which I have chosen to understand the documents of conquest and conver-

sion among the Spaniards and Tagalogs. At no point do I propose a theory (in the sense of a meta-language) for decoding colonial discourse. Instead, I perform a series of readings—or better still, vernacularizing practices—that enable me to posit the hybridity of colonial texts as these circulate among the colonizers and colonized. I tack between the authorizing vocabulary of contemporary critical theory and the linguistic particularity of Castilian and Tagalog sources, moving between the received and repressed narratives and artifacts of the “Philippine” past as these are mediated by the long and complex legacies of colonial rule. In doing so, I have sought to translate between a local history which remains proximate yet irreducibly foreign to me and the institutional imperatives of an American academic culture to which my work will necessarily bear an odd relation of affiliation *and* marginality.

Through a series of close readings, I attempt to work through the mutual embeddedness of the social and the textual, highlighting the contradictions between what a document says and how it says or fails to say it. I use this procedure of textual explication not to obscure the violence at the origins of colonial rule but to demonstrate how that violence—and resistances to it—reverberate on the most minute and most localized levels of social life. Far from being simply an aesthetic, my use of certain textual protocols is here meant to register the quotidian shocks of a globalizing phenomenon. My reading of vernacular texts by colonized Tagalogs in particular has been concerned not simply with recuperating the meanings of these documents, but also with reconstructing their formal properties, semantic elusiveness, and generative logic. In doing so, I draw attention to what I take to be the working of a subaltern agency brushing against the grain of Spanish expectations as it is signified by and in turn resignifies the language of colonial order.

What I would like to suggest here is that my attempt at a postcolonial reading of specific vernacularizing practices might serve to historicize, in its own circumscribed way, some of the current efforts at theorizing “difference” and “otherness.” Whatever salience this book might have as a partial and uneven intervention into both the critique of colonial discourse in the “West” as well as into the nationalist historiography of the Philippines lies in its attempts at indicating the recurrence of what Chakrabarty has termed the “radically heterogenous” inhabiting the specifically local. In a sense, my project is already foreshadowed by, if not complicitous with, Spanish missionary strategies for codifying local languages and “native superstitions” by closely attending to the problematic ties between

form and content, writing and speech, and meaning and affect of Tagalog and Spanish signifying practices. Yet, precisely because I write from another historical location, I find myself compelled to draw attention to the Tagalog converts' ambivalent responses to and recordings of missionary texts, characterized as they were by the evasion and reconfiguration of the grammar of a Christian-colonial discourse. Indeed, what recurs in the colonial context I examine are the ways by which translation and conversion produce the vernacular as that which simultaneously institutes *and* subverts colonial rule. Put differently, the imperialist textualization of the local not only reinvented the vernacular as a medium for consolidating the hierarchy between colonizers and colonized. Conceived as the site of interminable translations, the vernacular also effected the localization and reterritorialization of the transcendent claims of evangelization.

By reading the vernacular as the uncanny crossroads formed by and formative of the intersection of the local with the global, we can begin to understand its historical importance as a site of new social formations and shifting power relations. Deployed in the conversion of the Tagalogs, the vernacular (that is, both Castilian *and* Tagalog) served as a locus for the imposition of a colonial order which, like the notion of "reason" in other contexts, promised salvation from a backward, pagan past and assimilation into a civilized, univocal future. But to the extent that it necessarily provincialized that order, the vernacular also opened up a space for the emergence of the "popular" that would, as I argue, furnish a touchstone for different kinds of conversions and translations tangential to the colonial and, by the late nineteenth century, national order of things. Such then are the limited but, I hope, translatable and transportable claims that I seek to elaborate in the pages that follow.

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