



# Motherless Tongues. The Insurgency of Language Amid Wars of Translation, by Vicente Rafael, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016

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**Motherless tongues. The insurgency of language amid wars of translation**, by Vicente Rafael, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, 255 pp., \$89.95 (hardback) ISBN 978-0-8223-6058-2, \$24.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-8223-6074-2, (e-book) ISBN 978-0-8223-7457-2

In the run-up to the 2016 US Presidential Elections, mainstream news outlets regularly ran headlines foregrounding the impact that the politics of identity and personal grievance inflecting American civil society was bound to have on the outcome of the process (e.g. Sidiqqi and Gambino 2016; Pitner 2016). So when it became clear that Hillary Clinton had failed to galvanise black, Hispanic and female voters (Scott and Kirk 2016), some voices in the liberal camp felt compelled to advocate a shift to a 'post-identity liberalism'. Based on the past successes of its pre-identity counterpart, '[s]uch a liberalism would concentrate on widening its base by appealing to Americans as Americans and emphasising the issues that affect a vast majority of them' (Lilla 2016). Moving away from 'narrower issues that are highly charged symbolically and can drive potential allies away', it was argued, is necessary for liberals to be able to coalesce around a broader minimum common denominator, and hence to 'becom[e] a unifying force capable of governing' again (*ibid.*).

Lilla's call for 'the end of identity liberalism' is predicated on the premise that, by pandering to the logic and rhetoric of diversity, American progressive constituencies have abdicated their commitment to collective ideas of citizenship and nation, and transferred on to their individual members the agency that 'always exists in the differential and competing relations among the historical forces at play' in any given geographical and temporal context (Grossberg 1992, 123). Significantly, however, such defence of commonality over pluralism, and the neutralisation of agency that it entails, represents a dramatic U-turn in the trajectory of now established theorisations of the interface between identity and power within the Humanities. Pratt (1987) – chosen to illustrate this point here because, fittingly, she has endorsed the monograph under review – features among those scholars questioning the explanatory power of the essentialist categories of identity politics that Lilla would like to see strengthened. In her almost three-decade old piece, Pratt exposes the problems derived from the idealisation of the modern nation-state that lies at the centre of the post-identity liberalism agenda, and defines pluralism in terms of 'zones of contact' between dominant and dominated groups. Of particular relevance to this review is Pratt's contention that, as homogeneous nations become superseded by dynamic contact zones, it is 'the operation of language across lines of social differentiation' that provides citizens with the means to constitute 'each other relationally and in difference' (1987, 60). The enactment of identities through language within contact zones thus emerges as an important obstacle for any move to boost the electoral prospects of liberalism by reinforcing commonality.

Although Pratt's essay is not explicitly mentioned in the book, the role that language and translation have played and continue to play in the relational and oppositional configuration of various types of contact zones – whether these are studied in the context of past or present empires and revolutions – is a central concern of Vicente Rafael's *Motherless Tongues* (2016). Published amid mounting evidence of the exclusionary isolationism and inward turning of some Anglo-Saxon nations, Rafael's compelling account of how we are

constituted in and through translation – both in colonial and postcolonial sites of identity formation, often against a background characterised by an uneven distribution of power – is a timely celebration of ‘the radical irreducibility of languages to one another’ (15) and, by extension, of the ‘insurgency’ that such irreducibility involves. By drawing attention to the subversive potential of the agency that language unleashes, Rafael brings into sharp relief the futility of past, present and future political projects driven by the desire to neutralize and assimilate inflected identities.

*Motherless Tongues* consists of an introduction and nine chapters divided into three parts. The first one (‘Vernacularizing the political’), set in (post)colonial Philippines, consists of three chapters where the author shows how the complexity of the Philippine vernacular linguistic scene, compounded by the declining presence of Spanish and the fast-growing influence of English, is exploited to ‘shape not only the representation of events but also their very enactment’ (14). ‘Weaponizing Babel’, consisting of two chapters, explores the ways in which the US has instrumentalised translation as part of its Empire-building project, whether by trying to assimilate the foreign into its monolingual citizenship project, or by devising strategies of counterinsurgency in the context of the ‘War on Terror’ to weaponise ‘the very thing that lends to [native peoples’] lives a sense of commonality: their language’ (123). Four shorter chapters make up the third part (‘Translating lives’), where Rafael reflects on the link between biography and translation through the lives of various area scholars, including his own.

The introductory chapter (‘The aporia of translation’) begins with Rafael presenting an overview of his own linguistic history during his formative years – both in terms of straightforward associations between individual languages and specific private or public domains of his childhood; and combinations of the vernaculars and European languages within various forms of slang and jargon that he encountered in popular culture, religious practices and political activism during his teenage years. Adopting a philosophical stance, Rafael examines the implications of ‘inhabiting’ several (mother) languages, arguing that it is the very choice of one language to address others in any given situation that actualises a ‘reciprocal, translative relationship between *I* and *you*’ (7). In sites of struggle for emancipation, colonial occupation or war, he argues, the dominant party often resorts to translation – understood as the condition of possibility of speech – to force the subaltern or the oppressed into ‘imagined communities’ whose languages have to be domesticated. The expansion of Western Christianity, a strong imagined community closely associated with imperialist agendas, serves as an example to illustrate how translation has been successfully used to assimilate or convert non-Christian religious discourses and practices all over the world. But Rafael’s critique of this imagined community also reveals that such language-driven processes of domination are often challenged by the aporetic workings of translation, actualised here as the capacity of language ‘to resist reduction and conversion into definitive meanings and authoritative intentions’ (14). Ultimately, the insurgency of language and the resistance mounted by untranslatability hold the key to the emancipation of translation from occupation, empire-building and oppression. This dense and yet engaging chapter ends with an overview of the book that exposes its conceptual circuitry and presents the reader with various navigation paths to explore thematic connections across individual chapters.

Insofar as they relate to aspects of the Philippines’ colonial and contemporary history that do not feature prominently in translation studies research, this review will pay particular

attention to the issues covered in the first three chapters. Chapter 1 ('Welcoming what comes') begins by examining the historical context leading to the Philippine revolution against the Spanish imperial regime, led by 'the emergent, Spanish-speaking, Philippine-born, university-educated, racially mixed colonial bourgeoisie' (26): the *ilustrados*. Imperial sovereignty, understood as the articulation and expression of Divine law, was reappropriated by an elite who spoke the colonisers' language and wrote the Proclamation of Independence in their capacity as 'representatives', rather than 'members' of the people. Attempts on the part of the *ilustrado* leaders to exploit the Philippine people's claims to sovereignty, while plunging the masses into a subordinated position, are presented as evidence of 'the restoration of a chain of dependencies' (28). Rafael harnesses the complexity of these developments by drawing on the work of Apolinario Mabini, a 'theoretician of the revolution' who sought to establish connections between the Philippine revolution and other global democratic movements, and opened up an alternative notion of sovereignty based on natural – as opposed to Divine – law. In an intriguing twist, the final part of the chapter turns to explore the Tagalog concept of *kalayaan*, a vernacular articulation of sovereignty that does not involve any form of tutelage of the crowd by the elite. Drawing on various accounts of the Revolution, Rafael conceptualizes the freedom, solidarity and compassion enacted by *kalayaan* as expressions of *damayan*, understood as the desire to join rather than master the 'Other'.

Chapter 2 ('Wars of translation') revolves around American policymakers' imposition of English as the sole medium of instruction in the colonial public school system to ensure that it becomes the dominant language of rule. In the first half of this chapter, Rafael voices the views of Philippine nationalist movements on this matter. From this stance, the imposition of English was seen to facilitate the peaceful assimilation of Filipinos into the American colonial regime, while 'consign[ing] [them] to a racial state of exception' (45) that severely curtailed their rights. Crucially, such imposition was engineered as part of a wider process of social, political and ethnic hierarchisation that forced Filipinos into subservient roles. Key nationalist thinkers noted that the deployment of English within the school system 'to shape thinking and constrain dissent' (47) made Filipinos ignorant of their own history, limited their ability to develop critical thinking skills, and hence hampered any future prospect of democratisation in the country. Against the backdrop of these nationalist views, the second half of the chapter foregrounds the insurgency of language and the subversive potential of translation. Rafael quotes historical documents where American administrators express their concerns over the resilience of the vernaculars and the latter's 'ability to infiltrate the scene of instruction' (56) to create a 'Filipinized English' (*ibid.*). The work of journalist Nick Joaquin is chosen to explore the ramifications of vernacular resilience in the second half of the twentieth century, and illustrate the emergence of a playful Tagalog slang incorporating traits – and, in particular phonic features – of other vernaculars, Spanish and English. By 'carnivaliz[ing] the relationship between the imperial and subaltern languages' (69), the emerging slang places the vernaculars on an equal footing with English and Spanish, thus becoming imbued with an empowering or emancipatory significance.

Chapter 3 ('The cell phone and the crowd') examines how the Philippine bourgeoisie in the early twenty-first century exploited the affordances of mobile connectivity to 'translate' – as in 'articulating' and 'relaying' – a political strategy that required the mobilisation of the popular classes to oust the corrupt President Joseph Strada. The sort of 'translation' at play in this historical episode, predicated on the deterritorialised nature of remote communication,

enacts forms of social hierarchisation that resemble those examined in the first chapter. Just as *ilustrado* leaders tried to capitalise on popular sovereignty demands to advance their own interests following the Proclamation, tech-savvy Filipinos attempted to use the masses to voice middle-class demands while posing ‘the putative “voicelessness” of the masses’ (71). Rafael acknowledges that the willingness of the middle classes to put the mediating power of their mobile phones – compulsively actualised through the circulation of text messages – at the service of the wider community to effect political change could have been interpreted as an indication of their desire to dissolve class divisions. But when evidence became available that the crowds had found their own voice, Rafael notes, social divisions were quickly redrawn. The unscripted chants they sang to demand recognition of their own grievances enacted the insurgency of language in the eyes of the middle classes. No longer able to channel the aspirations of the crowd, middle class media disassociated themselves from the people’s agency and treated them ‘as simpletons deficient in moral and political consciousness [...] worthy of compassion’ (93).

In the second part of the book, Rafael shifts his analytical lens to explore how the US has weaponised the use of language and translation in contexts of war. Chapter 4 (‘Translation, American English, and the national insecurities of Empire’) charts the historical events that have placed monolingual citizenship at the heart of American democracy. Under the logic of ‘settler colonialism’ (111), America has been built through translation, understood here as the repression of people’s first language – whether on the part of the native Americans or the immigrants who continue to arrive from all over the world – in favour of English. America’s monolingualism is thus the result of countless instances of linguistic marginalisation and suppression that ‘confer on monolingual-settler citizens a sense of entitlement: nothing less than emancipation from the labor of translation and the freedom from the foreignness of languages [...], and from the foreignness of origins’ (111). Unsurprisingly, given the significance of past and present translation wars in the making of the Empire, English-centred American nationalism regards their intelligence officers’ ability to speak the enemy’s languages as crucial to their security and dominance. As Chapter 5 (‘Targeting translation’) also illustrates, however, pockets of resistance to translatability continue to exist in certain war contexts, such as those involving the recruitment of Iraqi nationals to serve as translators and interpreters for the US army. Despite their contribution to America’s wars, they are distrusted by the US military because, as Rafael puts it, ‘translation in wartime intensifies the experience of untranslatability and thus defies the demands of imperial assimilation’ (119). To tackle the uncertainty arising from linguistic insurgency, the US has experimented with the ultimate solution: automation. The development of ‘natural language speech translation interfaces and platforms’ (127), and mechanistic protocols for the selection of interpreters who are able to suppress ‘their personality, ideas, or questions’ (135) are characterised by Rafael as control fantasies whose output resists assimilation into America’s Empire-building narratives.

The four shorter biographical chapters bundled under section 3 conceptualise translation as processes of reconstitution driven by the need to make sense of oneself or the ‘Other’ in the wake of certain life contingencies. Chapter 6 (‘The Accidents of area studies’) revolves around Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai, two immigrant scholars whose accidental encounter with Indonesia and modernity – embodied by unknown Asian people and imported objects, respectively – engenders a ‘self-becoming’ process driven by a heightened sense of the self and others. In Chapter 7 (‘Contracting nostalgia’), Rafael explores the various

ways in which ethnographer Renato Rosato negotiated the gap that separated him from his lifetime objects of study, the Ilongots, against the backdrop of the shifting interplay between imperialist societies and their colonies. Chapter 8 ('Language, history and autobiography') focuses on Reynaldo Ileto's work on the freedom aspirations of peasant groups in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Philippines. To reveal the historical significance of these 'putatively premodern peasant movements' (174) to a readership of Westernised Filipinos, Ileto sprinkles his English prose with 'insurgent' Tagalog words, which manage 'to mobilize a mass of interests and commitments at odds with those of the educated and the wealthy ruling classes' (175). An interview with Vicente Rafael, originally published in the journal *Translation*, can be found in Chapter 9 ('Interview'). The ways in which language and translation have shaped various aspects of Rafael's biography can be connected in various ways with the auto-biographical narrative that the author himself delivers in the introductory chapter.

Although the three parts of this book clearly pull in different directions, thus resisting readers' efforts to engage with its arguments from a single set of disciplinary premises and expectations, *Motherless Tongues* is a revelatory and lucid rejection of the delusions of control of language flows implicit in the work of many a translation studies scholar. Amidst the continued hegemony of research moulded by the reassuring stability of different types of social and ideological structures, Rafael's superbly written book illuminates the counterpoint: translation as site for the everyday expression of dissent, subversion and insurgency. Disconcertingly, the author's attempt to 'keep open both our understanding and experience of what is historical' (18), articulated here in terms of the past and the present, promises to open equally fruitful ground for the study of globalised precarity and virtual cosmopolitanism, against a background of shifting realignments between hegemony and resistance.

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