

## **The Body Disordered: Diagnosing the Philippine Nation in José Rizal's *Noli me tángere* (1887)**

Azariah Alfante

José Rizal (1861-1896) was a Philippine nationalist, writer, and physician, whose status as national hero is manifest in the mandatory study of his works in educational institutions across the Philippine archipelago since the enactment of the nationalist Rizal Law (Republic Act No. 1425) on 12 June 1956 (Francia, "José Rizal" 44-45). Joan Torres Pou describes Rizal as a "médico oftalmólogo, licenciado en Filosofía y Letras, políglota, filólogo, antropólogo, escritor, agricultor, liberal, asimilacionista, independentista y masón" (7). In his profile of the Filipino polymath, however, Torres Pou omits a salient dimension of Rizal's identity: his Catholic religion. Although during his life Rizal struggled to come to terms with the Spanish Church, he was baptized a Catholic, was educated by Jesuits, and received the Sacraments before his execution.<sup>1</sup> His conceptualization of, and turbulent relationship with, the Catholic faith informed the thematic framework of his literary corpus. Several scholars have discussed how Catholicism informs Rizal's works. Petronilo Bn. Daroy's *The Ideas of European Liberalism in the Fiction of Rizal* touches on aspects of Catholicism and European liberalism in Rizal's novels. John D. Blanco's study analyzes the intersection of Christianity and Spanish colonialism in the Philippines, and provides an allegorical interpretation of the first of Rizal's two novels, *Noli me tángere* (1887).<sup>2</sup> Raúl Bonoan's article distinguishes Rizal from his liberal deist influences in terms of religion (65), thus opening up an inquiry into aspects of Catholicism in Rizal's writing.

Undoubtedly, the portrayal of religion in Rizal's novels and essays evinces the influence of the Catholic religion in Hispano-Philippine colonial relations. In León María Guerrero's words, "the Spanish history of the Philippines begins and ends with the friar" (xiii). In 1565, the Catholic religion was first brought to the Philippine island of Cebu, which became the first Spanish settlement. The chief, Rajah Humabon and his wife, Hara Humamay, not only entered into an agreement with Spain, but also accepted the colonizers' Catholic faith and passed it down to their subjects. Catholicism continued under the guidance of Spanish colonial officials and clerical leaders, with village parish priests typically working alongside the *gobernadorcillo* or town mayor (Francia, *History* 66).

This essay aims to demonstrate that, for Rizal, Catholicism was to perform many tasks in forging a Philippine national identity. I will first explore the concepts of hybridity and heresy in *Noli me tângere*, to subsequently analyze the religious and medical significance of the suffering body and its remedies: clerical reform and education. I will examine the influence of “race” on religion and education in the colonial Philippines, demonstrating that Rizal’s critiques are embodied in discussions between the novel’s protagonist, Ibarra, and an *indio* philosopher, schoolteacher, and boatman. I then compare the connections of nation, “race,” and religion in the Philippines with those of Spanish America, returning to the concept of hybridity as the core of a unique identity for the colonized Philippine people.

Ever since the Cavite Mutiny of 1872 (when three Filipino priests were executed for allegedly inciting a rebellion), the Spanish lay and clerical authorities frightened the Filipinos into submission (Agoncillo 9). There was a need, therefore, to awaken and strengthen the Philippine people, but this process would entail changes to the constituents of the Spanish yoke on the Philippine nation. John N. Schumacher asserts that the Filipino nationalists had come to view the Catholic religion as a means of perpetuating the status quo, of maintaining Spanish rule in the Philippines (*Propaganda Movement* 25). What demands further discussion is Rizal’s perception of Catholicism as portrayed in *Noli*, which forms the cornerstone of his idea of Philippine identity.

In *Noli me tângere*, Rizal introduces his perception of Spanish colonialism and Catholicism through medical imagery. In this work, the pained body is a *leitmotif* that figures as the liminal space between life and death, and specifically between the Philippine nation’s deterioration and revivification. Crucial to the latter’s collective plight, I suggest, are the notions of hybridity and heresy, formulated through the evocative language and imagery of pain and illness. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha declares that “hybridity is heresy” (225), adjoining concepts that appear categorically unrelated. In Catholic teaching, heresy is defined as “the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith” (*Catechism* 572). Heresy is “post-baptismal” because heretics are originally of the faith they are trying to reform; thus only baptized members of the Church can commit heresy. The heretic’s refusal to accept a religious doctrine constitutes an attack on their spiritual roots and vows made at the moment of their baptism, their spiritual birth.

Couching hybridity in religious terms connotes a rigorous defiance, which results in disorder and disunity. By interlacing the concept of hybridity with heresy, Bhabha discerns a separation from what is pure and acceptable. The non-conformist risks excommunication, the ritualized expulsion of dissident members to preserve the integrity and purity of the Church. Customarily associated with miscegenation, hybridity can also be regarded as a sociocultural “heresy” in that the colonized, albeit defiant, subject introduces a foreign ideology that is considered antithetical and potentially hazardous to the colonial authority. The heretical hybridity that Bhabha speaks of constitutes the initial act of ideological liminality within the colonized society and the Church, and can result in the member’s exclusion from the colony. For the baptized member (the colonized subject), hybridity represents a great hazard, a terminal disease. In *Noli*, the Spanish

colonial administration perceives racial and cultural hybridity as an illness that threatens to debilitate the imperial, colonial body. However, to restrict this dual hybridity would also mean to weaken the colonized people, who would then lack the vital resources for their growth. Thus, Rizal draws cogent connections between religion and “race” to elaborate his vision for the Philippine nation’s future.

In Rizal’s patriotic dedication, “A mi patria,” in *Noli me tângere*, the pathological metaphors of disease and health are used in his address to the Philippine nation:

Regístrase en la historia de los padecimientos humanos un cáncer de un carácter tan maligno que el menor contacto le irrita y despierta en él agudísimos dolores. Pues bien, cuántas veces en medio de las civilizaciones modernas he querido evocarte [la patria], ya para acompañarme de tus recuerdos, ya para compararte con otros países, tantas [veces] se me presentó tu querida imagen con un cáncer social parecido.  
(np)

Using an analogy reflective of his medical profession, Rizal compares his infirm country with other nations to reveal its state of backwardness. The metaphorized problem of pain is powerfully evocative by virtue of its social implications. Through illness, the patient is socially ostracized in the same way that the Philippine nation is regarded as feeble by Western and European standards. Treasuring his country’s past and cultural memory, Rizal underlines the grave sociopolitical conditions of the Philippines, cautioning that the nascent Philippine society is already suffering from a potentially terminal illness.

In her study on illness as a general metaphor, Susan Sontag describes cancer as a revolting, infectious disease that “starts from nothing” (85), a surreptitious infliction that seemingly invades from the outside. The cancer transforms into what Sontag labels “the disease of the Other” (65), a description that is particularly apt in the context of Philippine colonialism. The metaphor of illness, however, is not restricted to hegemonic powers. Both the colonizer, the carrier of disease, and the dominated Filipino “Other” are connected through an image of illness. The Filipinos are allegedly “ill” because they are not “pure” and “healthy” like their European colonizers. Although the “healthy” colonizing body, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White pinpoint, is apparently “*refined*, uncontaminated by the germs of the ‘spiritually inferior’” (136; emphasis in original), it must be remembered that the colonizer is the carrier of the disease.

In his preface to *Noli*, Rizal’s proposed cure lies in a religious analogy: “Deseando tu salud que es la nuestra, y buscando el mejor tratamiento, haré contigo lo que con sus enfermos los antiguos: exponíanlos en las gradas del templo, para que cada persona que viniese de invocar a la Divinidad les propusiese un remedio” (np). In his dedication, Rizal perceives religion as a sociopolitical means to change and heal the Philippine colony. The temple steps, I argue, form the symbolic space between the religious and secular that offers a possible remedy. In order to expose the nation’s symptoms, Rizal dictates that the object of his literary work is to depict the Philippine nation as he perceives it: a body in pain, lacking vitality and strength. As the Philippine motherland’s children too share in

her pains and weaknesses, a remedy is imperative for their survival: “Y a este fin, trataré de reproducir fielmente tu estado sin contemplaciones; levantaré parte del velo que encubre el mal, sacrificando a la verdad todo, hasta el mismo amor propio, pues, como hijo tuyo, adolezco también de tus defectos y flaquezas.”

Hence, this revelation of the Philippine nation’s ills to determine its potential cures can be perceived as an act of “diagnosis,” given that Spain’s increased colonial abuse in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had left the Philippines in “an atrophied state of feudalism” (Dahm 138, 136). In issue 25 (15 February 1890) of the Madrid periodical *La Solidaridad*, Rizal reinforces his novel’s aim in a letter written in reaction to a negative review by the Spanish literary critic, Vicente Barrantes: “[E]s una sátira y no una apología; sí, he pintado las llagas sociales de *mi patria*, hay en él *pesimismo* y *negruras*, y es porque veo mucha infamia en mi país, allá los miserables igualan en número a los imbéciles” (“Al Excmo. Señor Don Vicente Barrantes” 92; emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup>

The gravity of the nation’s degeneration is expressed in not only the novel’s dedication but also its title, aptly chosen by Rizal, who worked as a doctor. *Noli me tângere*, meaning “touch me not” in Latin, described a cancer of the upper face that affected the eyelids and nose, a disease deemed incurable up to the eighteenth century (Marmelzat 281). The metaphorization of this ailment, as Rizal indicates in his novel’s dedication, reflects the colonial status quo of the Philippines; the infected area would correspond figuratively with the corrupt political and ecclesiastical leaders in the upper offices of the Spanish colonial administration. I here draw on the theories of Stallybrass and White, who perceive the human body as a symbolic domain of social order, which is dependent on vertical hierarchies that constitute the cores of Western cultural mechanisms of structuring and sense-making (3). The upper part of the body (head and spirit) corresponds to the upper echelon of society (civic centers, courts, churches and mansions), and attempts to reject and remove the “bottom” (lower social strata) to protect its status and prestige (Stallybrass and White 5). Linking back to Rizal’s Latin title, Bernhard Dahm suggests that the malignant, facial tumor caused extreme pain when touched (138). In this allegory of the nation’s diseased corpus, the sensation of pain denotes the misery of the Filipinos, the children of the Philippine *patria*, caused by the “infection” from the colonial administration and its corrupt clergy.

In conjunction with pain, the distortion or cessation of normal bodily functions indicates a loss comparable to the experience of death. Pain serves, therefore, as a *memento mori* and mirrors the threshold between life and death. It approximates death but also keeps death in abeyance as the suffering patient undergoes a “resurrection” from death into life as well as feeling the proximity of death in life. In numerous tribal initiation rites, Elaine Scarry notes, pain was the symbolic substitute for the loss of life. Both physical pain and death are, in Scarry’s words, “the purest expressions of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness, though one is an absence and the other a felt presence, one occurring in the cessation of sentience, the other expressing itself in grotesque overload” (31). As mentioned above, in his dedication Rizal tasks himself with communicating his nation’s pains and ills since the desolate, suffering homeland cannot speak for itself.

Equally significant are the religious connotations of the novel's title.<sup>4</sup> The very phrase, *noli me tangere*, is taken from the Gospel of John in the Latin Vulgate. They were the words that the resurrected Christ uttered to Mary Magdalene, the first words spoken since Christ's Crucifixion. My consideration of the title's scriptural connotations is partially inspired by Manuel de Tuya's commentary of the New Testament, where he acknowledges that the phrase has been the subject of diverse interpretations and settles with this profound construal:

¿Qué relación hay entre este no "retener" a Cristo, de María abrazada y acaso besando sus pies, y el no haber "subido" aún al Padre? . . . la ascensión de Cristo no va a ser el motivo para que no se le pueda "retener." Porque aún no ha "subido" Cristo oficialmente al Padre; pero, teniendo ya una vida "gloriosa" y nueva, es por lo que ya no se pueden tener con Él las relaciones del mismo modo que antes; la vida humana no puede tener con el cuerpo y vida "gloriosa" de Cristo un trato, aunque espiritual, igual al que anteriormente tenía. (595)

According to Tuya, Christ's direct command signals his separation from earthly existence after rising from the dead. Christ, although resurrected and walking on earth again, is no longer associated with the human life experienced before death.

I extend this notion to mean a general departure from the earthly realm to the divine, from all things natural to all things supernatural. I wish to explore Rizal's idea of this departure, which, I argue, the novel's title evokes. In the Latin phrase, there is an acknowledged disconnection of the divine from the earthly, a recognition that Christ is no longer dwelling ordinarily with humankind. This is not to say, however, that Christ is no longer relevant to earthly affairs as a result of this departure; rather, Christ now occupies the liminal space between heaven and earth. The title alludes to the risen Messiah's presence on what Rizal calls in his dedication "las gradas del templo": the threshold between the human world of temporal affairs and the everlasting spiritual realm. This supernatural presence could only be made possible by a physical departure from and after death. Central to Christ's bodily departure from earth is the resurrection. The title also refers to Christ's resurrection, which signalled victory over death and pain. For Christians, it is ultimately an event of hope, which, in the Philippine context, symbolizes a hoped-for end to colonial injustice.

Abstracted from its biblical context and applied to Rizal's novel, the concept of departure connotes deviation and exile. Admittedly, the title is complex as a result of its references to both Christ's divine departure and human defiance and transgression on the other. *Noli* highlights how flawed human individuals commit errors by detaching themselves from the institutionalized, moral code of religion. The characters either experience or actuate these forms of departure, depending on their ethnic background and social standing.

Most prominent of these characters is the protagonist, Juan Crisóstomo Ibarra y Magsalin. After studying in Europe for seven years, Ibarra returns to Manila and is engaged to his childhood friend, María Clara, the daughter of Don Santiago de los

Santos, a wealthy landowner and former *gobernadorcillo*, who is commonly addressed as “Capitán Tiago.” Imitating the charitable actions of his wealthy Spanish father, Don Rafael, Ibarra assists the local schoolteacher in building a schoolhouse. At the same time, he meets Tasio, a native philosopher, and converses with him on colonial exploitation. When laying the cornerstone of a school building under construction, Ibarra is almost killed by a collapsing scaffold, only to be saved by Elías. It is implied that this incident was orchestrated by the Spanish parish priest and main antagonist, Fray Dámaso. Later, at a dinner, Fray Dámaso mocks the memory of Ibarra’s deceased father, provoking Ibarra to attack the priest. He is stopped by María Clara, who is revealed to be the biological daughter of Fray Dámaso and Capitán Tiago’s wife.

As a consequence of his actions, Ibarra is imprisoned, excommunicated, and later reinstated as a member of the Church with the help of the Governor General. At the end of the novel, when Ibarra and Elías are fleeing from the civil guard, Elías is shot while Ibarra manages to escape. María Clara, believing that Ibarra is dead, implores Fray Dámaso to put her in a convent instead of marrying her to another Spaniard, Don Alfonso Linares de Espadaña. A wounded Elías reaches the spot where Ibarra has hidden family treasure and finds a young *indio* boy, Basilio, weeping over his mother Sisa’s dead body.<sup>5</sup> Elías asks him to make a funeral pyre for him and Sisa, and informs Basilio that, if a certain man (Ibarra) does not come for his treasure buried there, he should dig it up and use it instead. Elías dies lamenting that he will never witness the dawning of his nation’s freedom.

Although Ibarra’s adversary is a clerical figure, Rizal’s *Noli* was not entirely antagonistic towards the clergy, given that its primary objective was to criticize the colonial administration and its numerous perversions of Christian traditions (Daroy 123). An instance of this critique is evident in that Ibarra’s father is punished for prioritizing the maltreated *indios*. Accused of heresy like Ibarra, Don Rafael was condemned for disapproving of the Spanish religious and political elite in the Philippines. Labelled a heretic and subversive, Don Rafael’s criticism of the Spanish friars’ and officials’ manipulation of the *indios* was considered by those powerful figures as an attack on both his religion and nation. An aged lieutenant, Guevara, informs Ibarra that Don Rafael died alone in prison after an illness worsened by “los sufrimientos, los disgustos, las incomodidades de la prisión o el dolor de ver a tantos ingratos” (*Noli* 22). Incarcerated for the death of an aggressive Spanish collector, from whom he was trying to rescue an injured, young *indio* schoolboy, Don Rafael was abandoned by his fellow Spanish compatriots:

Llovieron las calumnias, se le acusó de filibustero y hereje: ser hereje es en todas partes una desgracia, sobre todo en aquella época cuando la provincia tenía por alcalde a un hombre que hacía gala de devoción, que con sus criados rezaba en la iglesia en voz alta el rosario, quizás para que le oyesen todos y rezasen con él; pero ser filibustero es peor que ser hereje. (*Noli* 21)

Guevara confides in Ibarra that he attempted to exculpate Don Rafael by telling the Governor General that Don Rafael could not be a filibuster if he took in and cared for Spaniards. However, Don Rafael was accused by his enemies, especially Fray Dámaso, who abused his religious authority to punish Don Rafael for not partaking of the Sacrament of Penance (*Noli* 19).<sup>6</sup> Conversely, Guevara portrays Don Rafael as more honorable than those who confess, and criticizes the Spanish friars' abuse of the Sacrament of penance for monetary gain in the form of alms. In Guevara's words:

D. Rafael era un hombre muy honrado y más justo que muchos que confiesan y se confiesan . . . y solía decirme . . . Señor Guevara, ¿cree V. que Dios perdona un crimen, un asesinato por ejemplo, solo con decirlo a un sacerdote, hombre al fin que tiene el deber de callarlo, y temer tostarse en el infierno, que es el *acto de atrición*? . . . Yo tengo otra idea de Dios, decía: para mí, ni se corrige un mal con otro mal, ni se perdona con vanos lloriqueos, ni con limosnas a la Iglesia. (*Noli* 19; italics in original)

Both Don Rafael and Ibarra are regarded as heretics because their actions undermine the colonizers' power. Don Rafael treats the *indios* as his own compatriots and criticizes the Spanish friars' abuses. Ibarra's cultural hybridity, forged through his years in Europe, is considered a threat to the friars' intellectual superiority. The effect that this conceptualization of heresy has on the *indios* is rather humorously portrayed in a conversation between two minor characters: Hermana Putê, a religious member of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Rosary, and her husband. Hermana Putê declares that after Ibarra went to Spain, he allegedly returned a heretic because "todos los que se van a España se vuelven herejes, han dicho los curas" (*Noli* 305). Her husband's sarcastic rhetorical question deflects her accusation of heresy towards the Spanish colonizers, in the form of the Catholic Church and its representatives: "¿Y el cura, y todos los curas, y el Arzobispo, y el Papa y la Virgen no son de España? ¡Abá! ¿Serán también herejes?"

This conversation indicates that Ibarra, who was exposed to the liberal climate in Europe, is now regarded with distrust, regardless of his affiliation with the Catholic Church. Nikos Papastergiadis maintains that "the clash of cultures that colonialism invariably provoked, rather than producing a neat bifurcation between colonizer and colonized, encouraged the formation of new cultural hybrids" (264). Such an observation accurately defines Ibarra, who considers both the Philippines and Spain to be his home, and conserves his Catholic faith passed down by the Spaniards. Having spent his formative years in Europe and being of mixed ethnicity himself, Ibarra idealizes early Christian religion in the Philippines to the extent that he fails to notice the current religious climate in the colony. His persistent conceptualization of the Spanish empire as a historically religious authority and as a standard of moral goodness occludes attentive concern towards the relations between the Spanish colonizers and the *indio* masses under their charge.

Cultural and intellectual hybridity has ramifications for social and religious unity in the colonial Philippines. Through their dialogues, Ibarra, Elías and Tasio serve to demarcate contrasting views on spiritual authority in colonial society. Given that the Spanish friars,

the intermediaries between God and humankind, abuse their religious authority, Elías concludes that authority must now reside solely in God: “Os digo: sea Dios el único juez entre los hombres, sea Él el único que tenga derecho sobre la vida; ¡que el hombre no piense nunca en sustituirle!” (*Noli* 186). In comparison, Ibarra’s lack of understanding of the Philippine nation’s status quo is reflected in his conversations with Tasio and Elías, as I will outline shortly.

The juxtaposition of rich colonial officials and upper-class Filipinos with poor *indios* reveals that the wide socioeconomic disparity in the Philippine colony is underpinned by spiritual dispossession. The wealthy and powerful, those in good standing with the religious and secular officials of the colonial government, are visibly devout in carrying out European and Spanish religious rituals. Their financial donations to the friars only serve to perpetuate the simoniacal heresy: “Los ricos y pudientes han cumplido con los deudos que les legaron su fortuna; al día siguiente oirían las tres misas que dice cada sacerdote, darían dos pesos para otra en su intención, y luego comprarían la bula de los difuntos, llena de indulgencias” (*Noli* 73). Despite almost four centuries of Spanish rule, the *indios* cannot share in the same spiritual experience as they are dispossessed of the colonizer’s languages, Spanish and Latin, which are both used in private and public liturgy. Instead, the *indios* are represented as communicating in a language of pain and suffering, evocative of the plight of their nation, as Rizal identifies earlier:

Pero el pobre, el indigente que apenas gana para mantenerse y tiene que sobornar a los directorcillos, escribientes y soldados para que le dejen vivir en paz . . . No tiene las novenas, ni sabe las jaculatorias, ni los versos, ni los *oremus*, que han compuesto los frailes para los que no tienen ideas propias, ni propios sentimientos; no los entiende tampoco. Reza en el idioma de su miseria; su alma llora por sí y por los seres muertos cuyo amor era su bien. (*Noli* 73-74; italics in original)

Now used as a colonial tool in the nineteenth century, religion varies in significance for the affluent rulers and landowners on the one hand, and the poor *indios* on the other. Established as humankind’s source of consolation and salvation, and as a means to preserve humanity, religion has transmuted into a means of exploitation. As Vicente L. Rafael argues, Spanish clerics and the uneducated *indios* made “a travesty of the Catholic faith” (2). The narrative voice addresses the colonizers’ distortion of the Catholic religion: “Y tú, Religión predicada para la humanidad que sufre, ¿habrás olvidado tu misión de consolar al oprimido en su miseria y de humillar al poderoso en su orgullo, y sólo tendrías ahora promesas para los ricos, para los que pueden pagarte?” (*Noli* 73-74). The colonial abuses of the Catholic religion, as the narrator warns, will continue to multiply in the Philippine colony unless it is reformed. Since religion has been divested of its sacred essence, it must be sacralized once more to reverse the demoralizing effects of its perversion and enable it to “cure” the suffering Philippine collective body.

That religion in the imperial situation is politically charged is underscored in Nelson Maldonado Torres’s statement that, in colonial relations, “God is Master like the master” (198-99). The political and religious dynamic of the Empire is the deification of Man;



that is, the colonial master. Although the colonizer is elevated to the status of a god, he still necessitates a deity higher than himself (God) who can recognize and legitimize this colonial master (201). Empire, therefore, is an extension of political and religious hierarchy in general. In the context of imperialism, religion is utilized to justify and immortalize this tiered relation that descends from God, to the colonizer, to the colonized. Nevertheless, Maldonado Torres's argument does not address the direct relationship between the colonized themselves and the God of the colonizer. This relationship can be explored through one of the ways in which Rizal critiqued the relationship of Catholicism with the Filipino nation: "race."

"Race," Gerda Lerner argues, is one of the "processes through which hierarchical relations are created and maintained" (196). This statement certainly applies to the colonial period of the Philippines, in which, as Joyce Tolliver observes, the notions of *raza* and its associated practices were especially complex. The hierarchical nature of colonization in the Philippines, Tolliver explains, was explicitly perpetuated by racial classification: "Inhabitants of the archipelago were *legally* required to inscribe obedience to racial hierarchy in their daily personal interactions" (110; emphasis in original). Legal obligations for these Christianized natives or *indios* included removing one's hat whenever they encountered peninsulars (Spaniards born on Spanish soil) and creoles (Spaniards born in the colony). The *indios* were also obligated to kneel and kiss the ring of Spanish friars and were required to provide six weeks of forced labor annually (110). Francia notes that men between the ages of sixteen and sixty were expected to offer their services in these labor projects, known as *polos y servicios*, which ranged from servile work to military service. Tasks such as logging and shipbuilding, Francia notes, continued to disrupt the Filipinos' agricultural livelihoods, which provoked rebellious sentiment (*History* 66-67).<sup>7</sup>

The chief targets of such sentiment were the Spanish friars, whose abuses of religion brought about economic, social and political complaints (von der Mehden 208). Nationalist sentiment in the colonial Philippines was anticlerical, not anti-Catholic, as it attacked the abuses of the Spanish clergy, not Catholic doctrine itself (24). Such a situation is further refined in Rizal's work, which is not antagonistic toward the Catholic clergy as a whole but rather, makes cultural, ethnic and religious distinctions between the Filipino seculars and the Spanish regulars or friars (associated with a religious order).

The paucity of Spanish seculars in the Philippines meant that regulars were needed for the majority of administrative tasks even though these friars were formally trained to preach the faith, with the management of parishes assigned to seculars (Robles 22; Coates 21). While the missionaries in Latin America and the Philippines were mostly regular, there was a stark difference between the two. Church-State relations appeared to be stable in the Americas, where the monarchy, through the *derecho de patronato*, provided the clergy with benefits and infrastructure. By contrast, the Philippines' archipelagic makeup and distance from the Spanish metropolis impeded communication, all the more exacerbated by conflict between civil and ecclesiastical authorities (Díaz-Trechuelo 88, 95). Within the Philippines' religious hierarchy itself, there grew a virulent power

struggle that eventually involved racial discrimination towards the *indio* priests (Robles 22). Thus, the entire colonial clergy itself became a divided, and hence disordered, body.

As the Spanish regulars became accustomed to their new position of authority, they answered only to the superiors of their religious orders and not to the main colonial authorities: the Archbishop of Manila and the Governor-General acting as Vice Royal Patron. The friars were adverse to the appointment of secular Filipino priests, who posed a threat to their newly acquired power (Robles 22-23). The liberties secured by the Spanish regulars gave way to multiple abuses of religion such as negligence in preaching, simony, and sexual affairs with *indio* women in spite of the friars' vows of celibacy (87-92). These deeds would ultimately give the Church a bad reputation, a consequence that would be damaging to the Philippine colony, which was regarded as a "missionaries' empire" (Coates 3).

Rizal's constant censure of the Spanish friars who endanger the moral development of the *indios* comes to the fore in his essays in *La Solidaridad*. Thus, in "La verdad para todos," Rizal discerns a "lucha desgraciada" between "el frailismo que quiere la ignorancia y las tinieblas como el bandido que acecha en la noche y en el misterio" and "las clases ilustradas y nobles del país que quieren la luz, la unión, la inteligencia directa con España" (278). He derisively maintains that the Spanish friars in the Philippines have deviated from Christian moral tenets: "Para terminar repetiremos: hay mucha desmoralización en Filipinas, los cacareados ministros de Dios, y *propagadores de la luz* (¡!) no han sembrado ni siembran la moral cristiana; no han dado religión sino ritos y supersticiones" (276, emphasis in original). Rather than focus on the moral core of the Catholic faith, the Spanish Church in the Philippines is founded upon its exterior features, which the Filipinos hardly understand due to an inadequate education. Most importantly, it is the Spanish friars themselves who embody the essence of heresy.

Another of Rizal's letters in *La Solidaridad*, "Verdades nuevas," ridicules not just Spanish journalist Vicente Belloc y Sánchez's claim that the Spanish friars were "modelos de santos" (424), but also the European monopolization of the notion of civilization: "[S]on tan buenos los frailes que la bárbara España y la más bárbara e ignorante Europa no los quiere. Nosotros civilizaremos un día el Viejo Mundo con nuestras comunidades religiosas" (430). By referring to Filipino religious communities, Rizal separates the Philippines from Spain with regard to faithful religious observance. He inverts the religious element of European colonization, predicting in a collective voice that the Philippines will one day take on the role of "religious colonizer" in the "Viejo Mundo" of Europe, an assemblage of colonizing nations. Claiming to herald civilization, these Spanish friars only sow cruelty and reap *indio* ignorance by abusing religious principles and defying Church edicts. At the heart of colonial reform, therefore, is clerical reform, as Rizal states that virtue, which is perverted by those who claim to represent the moral code of the Catholic religion, is the key to national redemption.

Returning to the title's double meaning and expanding on Stallybrass and White's theories, I posit that the image of the cancer-ridden face also corresponds with the "upper" areas of the intellect and tongue. Mirroring the educated Rizal, Ibarra actively pursues the *indio*'s advancement through learning and language. It follows then that the

scholarly Spanish missionaries should figure as the lynchpins of the *indios'* progress. Further to the title's spiritual allusion to resurrection is what Blanco interprets as the "larger transition: from resurrection to ascension, from sickness to health, from silence to speech" (264). Such themes of upward mobility, improvement, and dialogue coincide with Ibarra's proposed reforms. It is through the cooperation of the clerical authorities that the colonized *indios* can represent themselves as legitimate members of the Philippine colony. The title's allusion to liminality denotes the Spanish clergy's influence, which encompasses the public and the pulpit.

Native secular priests in the Philippines pursued universal freedom, a principle upheld by Christian missionaries for centuries, and actively challenged the perceived gulf between the conquerors and the conquered. As a result, the Spanish colonizers persecuted them continuously (Blanco 129).<sup>8</sup> To bridge that divide between the colonizers and the colonized, Daroy suggests that education would be essential and highlights its presence in *Noli* as a political and religious tool crucial for social development (113). In *Noli*, Rizal casts the colonial education system, however, as favoring the wealthy, with the *indios* receiving only religious instruction from the friars, much of which is incomprehensible for linguistic and cultural reasons. Consequently, in Ibarra's discussion with a local schoolteacher, the latter informs him of the pedagogical repercussions of the flawed education system under the exploitative, negligent Spanish friars:

¿Quiere V. conocer los obstáculos en que tropieza la enseñanza? Pues bien, en las circunstancias en que estamos, sin un poderoso concurso la enseñanza nunca será un hecho, primero, porque en la niñez no hay aliciente ni estímulo, y segundo, porque aún cuando los hubiera, los matan la carencia de medios. (*Noli* 88)

The schoolteacher identifies two errors in the colonial education system: the school's limited syllabus and the friars' use of corporal punishment. Correcting these detrimental practices, however, proves difficult under the parish priest, whose authoritarian management deprives the schoolteacher of any real autonomy in the classroom. As Spanish friars were the primary educators of the *indio* masses, the colonial concept of education is limited to an incomplete, incoherent study of a foreign religious doctrine. The assignation of the role of instructor to the Spanish friars results in the curtailment of both the *indio* schoolteacher's instructional opportunities and the *indios'* intellectual growth. As the schoolteacher explains:

Necesitaría antes que todo tener escuela [...] y no como ahora que enseño al lado del coche del P. Cura, debajo del convento [...] El niño no respeta al maestro desde el instante en que le ve maltratado sin hacer prevalecer sus derechos. El maestro [...] para que su autoridad no se ponga en duda, necesita prestigio, buen nombre, fuerza moral, cierta libertad. (*Noli* 89)

The schoolteacher's financial dependence on the parish priest problematizes educational reform. Due to a lack of maps, for instance, the schoolteacher must use the floor tiles to teach his students geography. Given the parish priest's status as the locality's prime

political, religious and moral figure, any form of correction is considered insolent and irreligious.

In order to solve the linguistic problems of the educational system, the schoolteacher informs Ibarra of his strategy to teach Spanish: “Yo he querido introducir reformas y se me han reído. Para remediar aquel mal de que le hablaba, traté de enseñar el español a los niños porque además de que el Gobierno lo ordenaba, juzgué que sería también una ventaja para todos” (*Noli* 89). The schoolteacher concludes that his attempt was futile, recounting a time when, upon greeting Fray Dámaso, the friar replied shrewdly: “¿Con qué buenos días ha? ¡Buenos días! ¡Gracioso! ¡Ya sabes hablar español!” (*Noli* 89).

Here Rizal’s work presents the Castilian language as having the potential to bridge the cultural, intellectual and spiritual divide between Spain and the Philippine colony. Through the schoolteacher, education in Castilian is presented as imperative, but teaching it is officially reserved for the Spanish friars, who underfunded Spanish-language education for the *indio* (Kramer 61). The head sacristan’s disapproving words to the schoolteacher further demonstrate the religious, intellectual and cultural chasm between the colonizers and colonized: “No me uses prendas prestadas; conténtate con hablar tu idioma y no me echas a perder el español que no es para vosotros. ¿Conoces al maestro Ciruela? Pues, Ciruela era un maestro que no sabía leer y ponía escuela” (90). It is evident, then, that Castilian was designated as appropriate only for the upper classes and governing officials, the majority of whom were Spanish. What allowed for the friars’ “monopoly on linguistic access,” Benedict Anderson maintains, was their existent knowledge of native languages, which they exclusively used to preach to the *indios* (86). As more emphasis was placed on the dissemination of religious dogma, the Spanish friars alone practiced linguistic hybridity due to their lingual prowess. For the *indios*, there was no opportunity to express their cultural hybridity through language, even though their introduction to Western culture, in which Christianity thrived, was in itself a novel and hybrid experience.

That hybridity seems difficult to achieve in the late nineteenth-century Philippine colony is traceable to the imperialist legacy, which conflicts with cultural mixing. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin maintain that the binary logic of imperialism, which produces the wide interstice between colonizer and colonized, can be rearticulated in multiple ways (24). Linguistic capability, for instance, mutates into the underlying binary that differentiates Fray Dámaso and the head sacristan from the schoolteacher. In this case, language forms the hub of the imperial “othering” process (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 171). The monopolized usage of the Castilian language perpetuates the binary separation between the Spanish friars and the *indios*, between what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin label the “advanced” and the “retarded” (24). The language barrier that the Spanish friars deliberately maintain restricts the *indios*’ capacity to comprehend fully the religious messages transmitted to them, keeping them in a state of cultural, spiritual, and political inferiority. Faith, moreover, has lost its intrinsic sacredness and meaning due to the friars’ simony and negligence. Yet the imperial conferral of political power on the Spanish friars melds all forms of resistance to it into a major civil-spiritual transgression or heresy.

Tasio censures the friars' hypocrisy, whose actions defy the teachings of the very faith that their spiritual forefathers introduced to the Philippines and which they now claim to represent. Conversely, the hybrid Ibarra naively believes that the Philippine colony is devoted to Spain and that Spain is working towards introducing reforms to resolve abuses in the Philippines (*Noli* 139-40). At the same time, his devotion for the Philippines leads him to question his attachment to Spain: "Amo a mi patria, a Filipinas, porque a ella le debo mi vida y mi felicidad, y porque todo hombre debe amar su patria; amo a España, la patria de mis mayores, porque, a pesar de todo, Filipinas le debe y le deberá su felicidad y su porvenir; soy católico, conservo pura la fe de mis padres" (*Noli* 141). Ibarra's mixed ancestry and European education result in his belonging to both Spain and the Philippines, although he is neither accepted nor understood by either. Simultaneously associated with and dissociated from both colonizer and colony, Ibarra is figured as a cultural hybrid.

It is in Elías's conversations with Ibarra that Rizal presents different perspectives on the pursuit of nationhood. Elías defends *indio* customs and independence while Ibarra affirms his narrative of affiliation and hybridity, arguing for the fusion of *indio* and foreign elements in the formation of the Philippine nation. Such differing perceptions of what type of nationalism the Philippine colony should be modelled on, and whom the Philippine nation should include and exclude, demonstrate that there is no singular collective vision of nationhood. As separatism and hybridity conflict with each other, the construction of a national identity and the creation of a sense of belonging to any nation proves challenging. For the vast Philippine archipelago, it would be more so.

At first an idealist due to his wealth and cultural background, Ibarra becomes transformed through his interactions with the *indios*, the Spanish friars, and politicians. Before Ibarra and Elías part ways at the end of the novel, Ibarra acknowledges that more forceful measures, in the form of a violent revolution, must be implemented to achieve national autonomy and freedom for the Filipino people. He thus returns to portray the Philippines as suffering from a cancer that might be cured through drastic means, legitimating his desire for national revolution:

Ahora la desgracia me ha arrancado la venda; la soledad y la miseria de mi prisión me han enseñado; ahora veo el horrible cáncer que roe a esta sociedad, que se agarra a sus carnes y que pide una violenta extirpación. ¡Ellos me han abierto los ojos, me han hecho ver la llaga y me fuerzan a ser criminal! Y pues que lo han querido, seré filibustero, pero verdadero filibustero [Guerrero, León María. *The First Filipino*] ¡no, no seré criminal, nunca lo es él que lucha por su patria, al contrario! [...] ¡No hay Dios, no hay esperanzas, no hay humanidad; no hay más que el derecho de la fuerza! (*Noli* 337)

By the end of *Noli*, Ibarra is regarded as an exile and heretic. On becoming a diasporic subject by traveling abroad, Ibarra gains what Virinder S. Kalra, John Hutnyk, and Raminder Kaur describe as a "consciousness which provides an awareness of difference" (30). By accepting his hybridity, Ibarra's exilic state grants him the opportunity to

conceive of a Philippine national identity, given that, as Michael Seidel puts it, an exile is “someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another” (ix). Ibarra’s nationalist act of projecting a (constructed) reality will take place outside the Philippine homeland, as suggested in *Noli*’s sequel *El filibusterismo* (1891). As a racial and cultural hybrid concerned for the Filipino people, Ibarra will become the bridge between the colonizer and colonized. Rather than featuring as a form of danger, loss, and degeneration (Papastergiadis 259), hybridity as represented through Ibarra becomes a source of potential regeneration.

A comparison between Philippine and Spanish American colonies illuminates the colonial intersections of “race,” nation, religion, and hybridity in *Noli*. Despite being ruled as a “political extension” of Latin America (Kramer 38), the Philippines was divided, stratified, and excluded from the Spanish dominion due to being “racially and culturally unassimilated.” Hence, unlike Cuba and Puerto Rico, the Philippines was never granted full constitutional rule (Schmidt-Nowara 22-23). Political changes in Spain and the rise of Latin American independence led to liberal cutback policies, subsequently excluding the Philippines from representation in the *Cortes*. The non-Spanish-speaking archipelago thus became the outlier of the Spanish dominion, governed through modified versions of the Laws of the Indies and a set of “special laws” that applied to no other Spanish colony but the Philippines (Kramer 38-39). By examining these political and linguistic disparities, one might agree with Christopher Schmidt-Nowara’s assertion that Spain’s deprivation of Spanish-language education to the Philippine *indios* was a “betrayal” of its own history of assimilating conquered peoples (36). This observation explains the distinct identity of the *indios* as portrayed in *Noli*: individuals who have received the religion and laws of its colonizer, but none of their benefits. Still, these people hope for new life: Blanco’s notion of the “larger transition,” and the ability to advance. Such an evolution can only take place in the threshold between illness and health.

To conclude, Rizal’s engagement with the notions of hybridity and heresy in *Noli me tângere* reveals the intricate ways in which religion, “race” and politics were adjoined in the Philippine colonial era. This study’s principal metaphor of the disordered body alludes simultaneously to the ailing Philippine archipelago, the divided colonial clergy, and the corrupt Spanish friars. The religious and medical metaphors of the novel’s title, *Noli me tângere*, respond to these issues, yielding a multifaceted discussion on possibilities for their resolution. In this essay, I have foregrounded the different Filipino perceptions of Catholicism’s moral role in the nascent Philippine nation. Through his interactions with the Spanish colonizers and the *indios*, Ibarra demonstrates how, in the Hispano-Philippine colonial context, religion cannot be divorced from the hybrid identity that it helped to create. As Rizal would further develop in *El filibusterismo*, it is this sociopolitical hybridity that signals a potential remedy for the disordered, colonial body.

*University of Auckland*

---

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Due to conflicting biographical evidence, it is doubtful that Rizal embraced the Catholic religion on retracting opposing beliefs before his execution. Rafael Palma suggests that Rizal's reconciliation with the Catholic Church was a "pious fraud" that was necessary "to bolster the drooping prestige of religion" (343). Conversely, León María Guerrero contends that before his execution, Rizal professed his faith and received the Sacraments with as much piety as he had in his younger years (484).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay, the novel *Noli me tángere* will usually be shortened to *Noli*.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the divided contemporary reception of *Noli me tángere*, see Schumacher *Propaganda Movement* 82-92. Moreover, in the articles that he published in the first two volumes of the periodical *La Solidaridad* from 1889 to 1890, Rizal addresses a number of Spanish critics and discusses contemporary events in Europe, Spain, and the Philippines.

<sup>4</sup> While Bernhard Dahm's interpretation of the title rests solely on its pathological meaning, Petronilo Daroy acknowledges the title's medicinal and theological references (147).

<sup>5</sup> The Spanish colonizers in the New World applied the term *indio* to the peoples there (Ramírez Zavala 1643). That term, as Paul A. Kramer stresses, was then adapted to describe the baptized "unmixed" natives in the Philippines. Colonial Philippine society was classified according to *mestizaje* (blood mixture), territorial birth, and religion. Kramer adds that the *mestizo español* (Spanish and *indio*) was not as common as the *mestizo sangley* (Chinese and *indio*) (39).

<sup>6</sup> It seems ironic that Don Rafael is named after the archangel Saint Raphael, the patron saint of the spiritually remedial sacrament of penance. In fact, the archangel's Hebrew name means "God has healed" (Hammond 81). One might agree that it was the very news of Don Rafael's death that prompted Ibarra to consider the harsh treatment of the Spanish friars and colonial officials, marking the first step in Ibarra's endeavor to "cure" the Philippine nation.

<sup>7</sup> In referring to the Filipinos in *Noli*, I focus solely on the *indios*, those natives who received the Catholic faith. The Muslims in the south (so-called *moros*), along with the animist peoples (collectively known as *igorots*) and the Negritos of the highlands, did not welcome the Catholic religion and resisted Spanish colonialism (Tolliver 109-10; Francia, *History* 112).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of the native secular priests' conflict with Spanish regulars, see Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy* 13-32.

## Works Cited

- Agoncillo, Teodoro A. *Filipino Nationalism 1872-1970*. R.P. Garcia, 1974.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*. Verso, 2005.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2000.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Blanco, John D. *Frontier Constitutions: Christianity and Colonial Empire in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines*. U of California P, 2009.
- Bonoan, Raúl J. "The Enlightenment, Deism and Rizal." *Philippine Studies*, vol. 40, num. 1, 1992, pp. 53-67.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. CEPAC Secretariat, 1994.
- Coates, Austin. *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr*. Oxford UP, 1968.
- Dahm, Bernhard. "Rizal and the European Influence." *Solidarity*, vol. 130, 1991, pp. 89-125.
- Daroy, Petronilo Bn. *The Ideas of European Liberalism in the Fiction of Rizal*. U of the Philippines P, 1966.
- Díaz-Trechuelo, Lourdes. *Filipinas. La gran desconocida (1565-1898)*. Ediciones U de Navarra, S.A. (EUNSA), 2001.
- Francia, Luis H. *A History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos*. Overlook, 2014.
- . "José Rizal: A Man for all Generations." *The Antioch Review*, vol. 72, num. 1, 2014, pp. 44-60.
- Guerrero, León María. *The First Filipino*. The Journal Press, 1963.
- Hammond, Joseph. "The Cult and Representation of the Archangel Raphael in Sixteenth-Century Venice." *St Andrews Journal of Art History and Museum Studies*, vol. 15, 2011, pp. 79-88.
- Kalra, Virinder S., John Hutnyk, and Raminder Kaur. *Diaspora & Hybridity*. Sage, 2005.
- Kramer, Paul A. *The Blood of the Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines*. U of North Carolina P, 2006.
- Lerner, Gerda. *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- Maldonado Torres, Nelson. "The Meaning and Function of Religion in an Imperial World." *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by P. Bilimoria and A.B. Irvine, Springer, 2009, pp. 193-211.
- Marmelzat, Willard L. "'Noli-Me-Tangere' Circa 1754: Jacques Daviel's Forgotten Contribution to Skin Cancer." *Archives of Dermatology*, vol. 90, num. 3, 1964, pp: 280-83.
- Palma, Rafael. *The Pride of the Malay Race: A Biography of José Rizal*. Translated by Roman Ozaeta, Prentice-Hall, 1949.
- Papastergiadis, Nikos. "Tracing Hybridity in Theory." *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*. Edited by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, Zed Books, 1997, pp. 257-81.
- Rafael, Vicente L. *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*. Cornell UP, 1988.



- Ramírez Zavala, Ana Luz. "Indio/Indígena, 1750-1850." *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 60, num. 3, 2011, pp. 1643-1681.
- Rizal, José. "Al Excmo. Señor Don Vicente Barrantes." *La Solidaridad*, vol. 2, num. 23, 1890, pp. 86-98.
- . *El filibusterismo*. 1891. Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, 1961.
- . "La verdad para todos." *La Solidaridad*, vol. 1, num. 8, 1889, pp. 266-78.
- . *Noli me tângere*. 1887. Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, 1961.
- . "Verdades nuevas." *La Solidaridad*, vol. 1, num. 12, 1889, pp. 424-30.
- Robles, Eliodoro G. *The Philippines in the Nineteenth Century*. Malaya Books, 1969.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford UP, 1985.
- Schmidt-Nowara, Christopher. *The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2006.
- Schumacher, John N. *The Propaganda Movement, 1880-1895: The Creators of a Filipino Consciousness, the Makers of the Revolution*. Solidaridad, 1973.
- . *Revolutionary Clergy: The Filipino Clergy and the Nationalist Movement, 1850-1903*. Ateneo de Manila UP, 1981.
- Seidel, Michael. *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*. Yale UP, 1986.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Methuen, 1986.
- Tolliver, Joyce. "'El color nacional': Race, Nation and the Philippine Ilustrados." *Empire's End: Transnational Connections in the Hispanic World*. Edited by William G. Acree and Akiko Tsuchiya, Vanderbilt UP, 2016, pp. 107-27.
- Torres Pou, Joan. "La narrativa anticolonial hispano-filipina: el caso de *Noli me tângere* y *El filibusterismo* de José Rizal." *Iberoamericana*, vol. 1, num. 1, 2001, pp. 7-14.
- Tuya, Manuel de. *Biblia comentada: Texto de la Nácar-Colunga: V Evangelios*. 2nd ed., Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1971.
- Von der Mehden, Fred R. *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines*. U of Wisconsin P, 1963.