

Philippine literature, digital humanities and distant learning

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Barely 20 years ago, scholars of Philippine literature in Spanish struggled to be noticed in Hispanic and Asian studies while facing numerous challenges around the preservation of Philippine textual heritage. The current project DigiPhiLit¹ not only demonstrates that the field is thriving, but also that it has the potential to normalize the study of Philippine literature at universities offering Spanish programs.

Philippine literature in Spanish for a global audience

From the 1880s, Filipino authors began to write works in Spanish. Some of them criticized the colonial administrations (first the Spanish one and then the American one) and laid the foundations of nation-building. The usage of Spanish outlasted Spanish rule, continuing through the American rule from 1898 and extending well into the 1940s. It became the literary language of postcolonial expression, deployed by a wide range of writers: from the poets who produced their own Filipino modernist poetry in the early 20th century to the women authors rewriting stereotypical portraits of Filipino women in the 1930s and claiming their right to vote. This extremely rich corpus is nonetheless relatively unknown in the Philippines as well as in the field of Hispanic studies. With the disappearance of the Spanish language in the Philippines, only the most canonical of these works have been translated and widely received among Filipinos (e.g., José Rizal's (1861-1896) novels). Within Hispanic studies, until quite recently, the Philippines has been an extremely peripheral area, with its literature completely absent from even PhD programs.

For decades, some scholars undertook a stoic effort of categorizing and analyzing this corpus with little impact on Hispanic or even Philippine Studies. By the early 21st century, this scenario changed thanks to the burgeoning of Hispanic-Asian studies and the visibility and accessibility provided by the digitization of these texts. The number of studies on Philippine literature in Spanish has soared in the last ten years. As Hispanic studies became a more inclusive and decentered field, the Philippines is finally gaining long awaited attention. However, whilst institutions of higher education

realize the need to offer curricula that reflect transcultural connections and include marginalized areas such as Asia and Africa in Hispanic studies, most universities still face several challenges for integrating the Philippines into their programs. Despite the academic vitality on this subject, there are not yet enough professors who specialize on Philippine Literature in Spanish nor teaching materials on works that until recently had been neglected.

DigiPhiLit is an initiative that responds to these structural problems, aiming to fully put Philippine literature in Spanish on the map. It does so by taking advantage of the growth in Digital Humanities and the potential of distance learning didactics. Funded with an Erasmus Plus grant by the European Union (2020-2023), five universities, coordinated by the University of Antwerp (Belgium), constitute the knowledge network: Université of Clermont-Auvergne (France), Université Paris Nanterre (France), Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Spain), UNED (Spain), and Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines).

The rationale is to create materials and train professionals in order to facilitate the integration of Philippine Literature in Spanish in the curricula of Higher Education institutions. For this purpose, the project plans several actions. One of the most outstanding is the creation of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) on this subject. A free course that will be offered in January 2022 as an elective in some universities, but that will also be available for secondary schools and the wider public interested in the topic. By now, most of us are used to "emergency" distant learning, but we would like this course to be more than just a series of videos. On the contrary, we aim to improve interactivity in distant learning. Thus, we will be organizing some training activities on this to apply our newly acquired knowledge to the MOOC.

We have also planned some summer schools on Philippine Literature in Spanish. These are mainly aimed at PhD students interested in the field, and at scholars specialized from related fields, so that they can include Philippine Literature topics in their courses. As soon as our current pandemic world is left behind, we will organize training events in the campuses of the participating universities in Antwerp, Paris, Clermont-Ferrand, Madrid, and Manila.

Building upon the materials designed for this MOOC, DigiPhiLit will also publish an Introduction to Philippine Literature in Spanish, a volume that will cull from the expertise of some of the scholars involved in the project as well as from other specialists in the field at universities in Asia, Europe, and the United States. It has been a long while since a history of the Philippine Literature in Spanish has been published. In 1993, Edgardo Tiamson published *A Re-appreciation of Philippine Literature in Spanish*. Before that, in 1974, Luis Mariñas wrote *La literatura filipina en castellano*, a brief book published in Madrid by a diplomat of the Spanish Francoist regime. Therefore, we view the companion as a good opportunity to reassess the history of this literature, especially now that more documents are available for researchers around the world thanks to the digital efforts carried out by institutions

such as the University of Santo Tomás, the University of Michigan, the Spanish National Library, and Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes. The availability of books comes hand-in-hand with the growing field of Digital Humanities, which provides new insights into texts through their digital analysis.

In this sense, DigiPhiLit draws on recent and ongoing projects that use digital methodologies to preserve, provide visibility, and analyze Philippine Literature in Spanish. Previous efforts made from the University of Antwerp in partnership with the University of the Philippines include PhilPeriodicals,² a project for digitizing rare periodicals from the University of the Philippines Library and publishing them online in a freely accessible repository funded by the Flemish Agency for Academic Cooperation (VLIRUOS). The project also provides training in Digital Humanities to work with this repository. A connected initiative is Filiteratura,³ a database on Philippine literature in Spanish (and literature in Spanish on the Philippines), which includes information (and the location) of books and newspapers, as well as information on authors, publishing houses, and awards. Our partners in UNED also have extensive experience in digital projects related to literary studies, as do some of our external assessors such as Gaspar Vibal, the CO of Vibal Foundation. He is the hand behind WikiPilipinas,⁴ an online encyclopedia dedicated to the Philippines, and Filipiniana.net, a digital library which in the 2010s spent considerable effort publishing long out-of-print Hispano-Filipino books. As its initial offering to the public this year, Filipiniana.net will be launching the *Documentos del Quincentenario* in September 2021. This is a microsite with freely accessible documents, webinars, articles and links to books that provide a better understanding of the significance of Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521) and Juan Sebastián Elcano's (1486/87-1526) first circumnavigation of the earth in 1521 for the Philippines.⁵ In this second stage, the project is captained by Jorge Mojarro, also a member of our external assessors committee.

The Philippines and beyond

Among the members of DigiPhiLit, there are outstanding academics in Philippine Studies, but also literary scholars who specialize in areas such as Spain, Latin America, and Africa. The project was thus designed to avoid perpetuating the isolation of Philippine studies. This project highlights the connections of Philippine heritage with other literary and cultural productions in the global Hispanic world. The scope of DigiPhiLit is also global: it hopes to make Philippine literature available for a world audience, but also to provide methods, examples, and resources on how to take advantage of Digital Humanities for the teaching of literature in Higher Education. Apart from the concrete outputs on Philippine Literature, DigiPhiLit will also publish an open-source online guide about good practices in teaching literature in distance learning, several articles describing the process of setting up a MOOC, and a guide for the inclusion of Digital Humanities in the teaching of literature in Spanish.

We also need to take into account the isolation of this literature within the Philippines. As mentioned above, despite being a very valuable heritage, this corpus of works is no longer understood in the country. The association with Ateneo de Manila will overcome this problem, as they will be responsible for translating the subtitles of the MOOC into both English and Filipino. In this way, the resource will be accessible for Filipinos interested in their own culture, even if they do not understand Spanish. There are also plans for translating some of the corpus through the use of automatic translation.

As part of its outreach objective, DigiPhiLit will organize a symposium on distance learning in higher education (December 2022) as well as two workshops on Digital Humanities in the teaching of literature. The first of these workshops took place between February 8-24 2021, offering six free sessions in which trainers from Spain, Latin America, and the United States covered a wide range of digital tools and applications to the study of literature: digital corpus creation, named entity tagging, text-mining, corpus linguistics applied to literary studies, network representation and topic modeling. More than 150 scholars registered for this first workshop. The presenters as well as the participants used a variety of literary sources, not just limited to Philippine literature in Spanish. The second of these workshops will be held in February 2022.

With these projects, DigiPhiLit aims at narrowing the gap between research trends and educational practices in the Humanities, providing didactic tools that are fundamental for the growth of Philippine Studies but that will also greatly benefit scholars who work on literature from other regions. Nonetheless, it is important not to underestimate the potential impact for these workshops to render visible this particular Asian literature: for some of the participants, the fact that these events are organized within the general frame of DigiPhiLit will constitute a first familiarization with the existence of Philippine literature in Spanish. DigiPhiLit intends to finally reverse the narrative, making Philippine studies in Spanish not just the perpetually upcoming field, but a consolidated study area that can set new models for the teaching of literature.

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Notes

- <https://digiphilit.uantwerpen.be>
- <https://hosting.uantwerpen.be/philperiodicals>
- <https://filiteratura.uantwerpen.be>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WikiPilipinas>
- <https://www.vibalgroup.com/quincentenario>



Fig. 1: José Rizal Monument, Rizal Park, Manila, Luzon, Philippines. Reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Gary Todd on Flickr.