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# Mobility of Time and Transportation in Deogracias A. Rosario's "Greta Garbo"

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Deogracias A. Rosario's "Greta Garbo" through a symbolic and spatial-temporal analysis to explore the tensions of Filipino identity under American colonial influence. Employing a close textual reading method grounded in postcolonial theory—particularly Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry and Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopias—the research investigates how the narrative constructs and deconstructs identities shaped by modernization and Westernization. The protagonist, Monina Vargas, idolizes the Hollywood actress Greta Garbo and undertakes a train journey to meet her lover, Octavio Razon. This movement metaphorically embodies her oscillation between colonial illusion and disillusionment. The train functions not only as a literal vehicle of transportation but also as a metaphorical site of psychological transformation and cultural negotiation. Temporal markers such as the ticking clock and the train's motion highlight Monina's internal conflict, emphasizing the fleeting nature of her colonial aspirations. The study underscores the psychological displacement resulting from emulating foreign ideals by contextualizing spatial movement between Manila and Baguio (Bagyo) as a symbolic confrontation with colonial reality. Rosario's use of the train and temporal motifs critiques the pervasive reach of Americanization in shaping Filipino consciousness, portraying the fragility of identities constructed on borrowed symbols. This analysis situates "Greta Garbo" within the broader discourse of Philippine literature during the American colonial period, illustrating how literature becomes a medium for articulating the contradictions of colonial modernity. Ultimately, the study contributes to ongoing conversations on mobility, cultural displacement, and identity formation in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

**Keywords:** *American colonialism; colonial identity; cultural displacement; modernization and mobility; Philippine literature*

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## INTRODUCTION

Deogracias A. Rosario's "Greta Garbo" (1995) remains a pivotal text in Philippine literary history, widely recognized for its psychological nuance, narrative economy, and cultural resonance. Composed during the American colonial period, the story portrays the experiences of Monina Vargas, a young Filipina captivated by the glamour of Hollywood and its most iconic star, Greta Garbo. Her journey by train to Baguio (Bagyo)—undertaken with the hope of

fulfilling a romantic fantasy—unfolds as a layered exploration of colonial mimicry, gendered desire, and modern dislocation. Beneath its deceptively simple premise lies a trenchant critique of the psychological fragmentation wrought by colonial modernity, particularly as experienced by women socialized to embody Western ideals. Rosario—often celebrated as the "Father of the Tagalog Short Story"—employs realist and symbolic strategies to capture Filipinos'

internal contradictions, navigating the dissonance between indigenous traditions and American cultural hegemony (Agoncillo, 1990, Eugenio, 2007).

This paper takes "Greta Garbo" as its primary object of study, examining how its narrative structure, spatial metaphors, and symbolic representations of movement articulate the psychic costs of colonial identity formation. The central research problem addressed is how Rosario's symbolic use of mobility, cinematic fantasy, and liminal space reveals colonial mimicry's emotional and psychological toll in early 20th-century Philippines. This study argues that "Greta Garbo" is not merely a story of romantic disappointment but a postcolonial allegory of psychological dislocation, wherein trains, dreams, and cinematic illusions operate as conduits of aspiration and alienation. Through its subtle layering of space, motion, and desire, the text dramatizes how colonial subjects, especially women, are caught between fantasies of modernity and the often-painful return to their culturally marginalized realities.

The story's symbolic framework becomes even more compelling when read against the backdrop of American colonial policy, which actively sought to reorient Filipino subjectivity through English-language education, mass media, and infrastructure development (Tolentino 2001). During the first half of the 20th century, Hollywood films circulated widely in the Philippines, introducing ideals of beauty, romance, and cosmopolitanism that reshaped national aspirations. Rosario's use of Greta Garbo as an intertextual figure highlights the global reach of these visual regimes and their intimate psychological consequences. Monina's idolization of Garbo is not simply an aesthetic choice; it is a symptom of cultural seduction, where the colonized internalizes the colonizer's image of perfection while becoming alienated from her self-concept.

Existing scholarship on Rosario has generally focused on his mastery of form, his role in developing the Tagalog short story, and his psychological realism (Lumbera, 1997; Eugenio, 2007). However, fewer studies have examined his work's spatial and symbolic dimensions, particularly through the lens of postcolonial critique. In recent years, literary geography and mobility studies have emphasized the importance of spatial tropes in colonial and postcolonial narratives. Bishop, Phillips, & Yeo (2003) and Lefebvre (1974) argue that colonial

infrastructures—roads, trains, stations—are not just backdrops for action but active participants in shaping colonial affect and orientation. Similarly, Coronado (2020) explores how railways function as disciplinary technologies that mobilize bodies while displacing identities. These insights are especially relevant in the Philippine context, where the American colonial government presented infrastructure as a symbol of modernization and nation-building, while using it to entrench racial and economic hierarchies.

Moreover, the intersection of gender, colonial visual culture, and fantasy has been foregrounded in the works of Tolentino (2001) and Coronado (2020). These scholars explore how Filipina women were socialized to embody imported standards of beauty and morality, often modeled after Hollywood stars. The idealization of white femininity, as epitomized by Garbo, contributed to what Fanon (1952) calls the "epidermalization" of inferiority. In this psychological condition, the colonized subject evaluates herself through the colonizer's gaze. In this context, "Greta Garbo" becomes a story not just about mimicry, but about the intimate violence of wanting to belong in a world designed to exclude.

This paper situates Rosario's work within the broader tradition of Philippine literary resistance. While not overtly political like Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* or *El Filibusterismo*, "Greta Garbo" draws from similar impulses: it critiques the dissonance between appearance and reality, fantasy and betrayal, modernity and tradition. Rosario's approach is subtler, more introspective, but no less radical. His adaptation of the Western short story form, merged with indigenous modes of allegory and emotional depth, allows him to engage the colonial condition within the intimate contours of the self. His use of trains, Hollywood references, and disillusioned romance reflects a creative appropriation of colonial forms to narrate postcolonial estrangement.

Theoretically, this study draws on Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of colonial mimicry and Michel Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias. Bhabha's argument that mimicry is "almost the same, but not quite" offers a powerful lens through which to understand Monina's failure to inhabit the persona she imitates fully. Her identity is fractured—compelled to approximate the colonizer's standards without attaining them. Meanwhile, Foucault's heterotopia provides a framework to interpret the train as liminal

space destabilizing normative binaries—fantasy versus reality, past versus future, and self versus other. Monina’s journey is not only geographical but ontological; it traces the unraveling of a self caught in transit, shaped by forces beyond her control. These classic postcolonial frameworks are further expanded through more recent discussions on spatial affect (Foucault, 1986), colonial visibility (Lagji, 2019), and Filipino cinematic modernity (Tolentino, 2001).

Methodologically, the research applies close textual analysis, focusing on the interplay between narrative form, symbolic structure, and thematic resonance. Attention is paid to the recurring motifs of movement—train whistles, clocks, and station platforms—as well as to physical and emotional markers like Monina’s bruised face, her fantasies of John Gilbert, and the shocking newspaper headline that precipitates her fall. These are read as literary devices and as historical and cultural signs embedded within the colonial matrix. The analysis is supported by an interdisciplinary critical framework, drawing from postcolonial theory, gender studies, and spatial humanities. In anchoring the narrative within the historical realities of American colonialism—including the spread of English, the construction of railway systems, and the circulation of film—this study emphasizes the material contexts that shape and are reflected in Rosario’s fiction (Lumbera, 1997).

Ultimately, this paper contends that “Greta Garbo” offers a powerful literary account of how modernity, filtered through colonial structures, produces not coherence but disorientation. It is a story of movement without arrival, of desires cultivated but unfulfilled. In foregrounding Monina’s disillusionment, Rosario anticipates contemporary debates in postcolonial theory, especially those concerning mobility, affect, and mimicry. His work remains deeply relevant as a historical artifact and a critical lens through which to examine the enduring entanglements of colonial pasts and postcolonial presents.

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive approach grounded in literary analysis to examine “Greta Garbo” by Deogracias A. Rosario. The research design prioritizes close textual reading, symbolic interpretation, and thematic analysis to uncover the narrative’s engagement with colonial modernity, psychological dislocation, and gendered mimicry. The interpretive framework is shaped by

postcolonial theory, spatial and mobility studies, and feminist cultural critique, allowing for a nuanced examination of how American colonialism reshaped Filipino identity through cultural, infrastructural, and aesthetic means.

Central to this analysis is the application of postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) notion of colonial mimicry, which posits that the colonized subject’s attempt to emulate the colonizer’s identity produces a condition of ambivalence—“almost the same, but not quite.” This framework illuminates Monina Vargas’s internal conflict as she adopts Western ideals of beauty, romance, and selfhood, only to find herself alienated by their unattainability. In addition, Frantz Fanon’s (1952) concept of epidermalization informs the psychological dimensions of the narrative, particularly the embodied consequences of internalized colonial aesthetics. Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) intervention into subaltern consciousness also supports this study’s attention to narrative gaps and ideological silences, especially regarding the female colonial subject’s constrained voice and agency.

Complementing this postcolonial lens is spatial theory, with Michel Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopias serving as a key analytical tool. The train in “Greta Garbo” is not only a mode of transportation but a liminal, heterotopic space that reflects Monina’s psychological fragmentation and her oscillation between illusion and reality. Recent scholarship on colonial infrastructures by Papastergiadis (2006) affirms the symbolic and emotional weight of railroads and urban spaces in shaping the colonial subject’s experience of mobility and displacement. These insights support the reading of the train and the journey between Manila and Baguio as metaphors for dislocation, fractured identity, and the false promises of progress.

The study draws from feminist and cultural studies, particularly those focused on Filipino responses to American imperial aesthetics. Works by Soriano (2014) are essential to understanding the gendered dynamics of colonial mimicry, especially how Filipinas were socialized to embody Western beauty standards disseminated through Hollywood cinema. Tolentino’s (2001) critique of Americanized gender scripts in Philippine popular culture further contextualizes Monina’s performative femininity and emotional labor within a broader ideological framework.

The primary source for this study is Rosario’s

"Greta Garbo", analyzed in its original Tagalog form and interpreted within its historical context during the American colonial period. Close reading examines narrative devices, symbolism, temporal structure, and character development. Special attention is given to recurring motifs—such as the train, ticking clock, newspaper, and bruised face—and how these elements encode both personal and collective experiences of disillusionment. A thematic analysis further structures the study around key conceptual threads: mimicry and disillusionment, symbolic mobility, colonial temporality, and gendered cultural identity.

To contextualize the narrative, this research also engages with archival and secondary historical sources on the cultural policies and infrastructural developments of the American colonial regime, including the introduction of English-language education, the rise of Hollywood cinema, and the construction of railway systems and urban centers like Baguio (Bastin & Benda, 1968). These materials provide the sociohistorical backdrop necessary to situate "Greta Garbo" within the overlapping traditions of Philippine literature, such as the romantic-allegorical mode of Balagtas and the realist social critique of Rizal, while also identifying the evolution of these forms under U.S. colonial influence.

The scope of the study is limited to "Greta Garbo" as a standalone text. While the broader oeuvre of Rosario and comparative works from the same period are referenced where relevant, the primary focus remains on the narrative and symbolic architecture of this single short story. The methodology avoids sociological generalizations, emphasizing textual and conceptual depth through rigorous literary interpretation. As this study relies entirely on publicly available literary and scholarly materials, there are no ethical concerns regarding human subjects or data sensitivity.

By integrating close textual analysis with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates how "Greta Garbo" functions as a literary critique of American colonial modernity and its effects on Filipino identity. The methodology allows for a focused analysis of narrative form and symbolism and positions the text within larger conversations in postcolonial, spatial, and gender studies, reaffirming literature's role in theorizing the colonial condition.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

This section offers a thematic reading of "Greta Garbo" by Deogracias A. Rosario, analyzing its symbolic, spatial, and psychological elements. Anchored in postcolonial theory—particularly Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of colonial mimicry and Michel Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias—the analysis explores how Monina Vargas's journey illustrates the dissonant experience of Filipino identity formation during the American colonial period. Drawing on recent scholarly insights, this discussion highlights how space, transport, time, and media icons mediate colonial tension, underscoring the text's enduring relevance in studying Philippine literature and postcolonial identity.

### **Mobility, Modernization, and the Colonial Condition**

#### **The Train as a Liminal Space**

The train in "Greta Garbo" is not merely a backdrop for narrative movement but a deeply symbolic site where colonial transformation and psychological conflict converge. On a literal level, the railway system is emblematic of American infrastructural imposition—an artifact of modernization introduced under U.S. colonial governance. It aligns with historical accounts of how transportation infrastructure was used as an ideological apparatus to facilitate state surveillance, economic extraction, and the consolidation of colonial control (Mojares, 2006). However, the train in Rosario's narrative transcends its physical utility. It becomes a heterotopic site in Foucault's (1986) sense—a space of deviation that reflects and simultaneously contests dominant social and spatial norms.

As a heterotopia, the train is both a space of transition and contradiction. It neither fully belongs to the origin nor to the destination; rather, it exists in a suspended in-between state. Within this space, normative temporalities and identities are unsettled, allowing for the projection, performance, and subsequent unraveling of idealized selves. For Monina Vargas, the train functions as a liminal setting where multiple identities—Filipina and Americanized, indigenous and modern, authentic and performed—intersect and conflict. The closed, mobile space of the train encapsulates her internal crisis, making the journey a metaphoric passage through the psychological terrain of colonial mimicry.

*Talagang kahawig ni Greta Garbo si Monina Vargas. Singkit ng kaunti ang dalawang mata, tabas tari ng manok ang dalawang kilay, humpak ng kaunti ang pisngi na bumagay ng kanyang ilong na hindi naman katangusan at sa maliit niyang bibig na nahihiyasan ng maninipis na labi tila lamang listing pulang nakatali sa isang pumpon ng rosas...Si Greta Garbo ang kanyang "ideal", kung nagging makata siya'y ito ang kanyang paraluman; kung naging banal siya'y ito ang kanyang Dios... Dahil diyan kaya tinawag siyang GG (Greta Garbo) ng kanyang mga kaibigan.*

(Rosario, 1995: 64)

Monina Vargas really resembles Greta Garbo. Her eyes are slightly slanted, her eyebrows shaped like a cockfighting blade, her cheeks slightly sunken which suited her nose that isn't particularly pointed, and her small mouth adorned with thin lips, like a strip of red ribbon tied around a bouquet of roses... Greta Garbo is her 'ideal'; if she had become a poet, Garbo would be her muse; if she had become a saint, Garbo would be her God... Because of that, her friends called her GG (Greta Garbo).

Monina's idealization of Greta Garbo is not a trivial preference but a symbolic projection of colonial desire. Her physical resemblance to Garbo is emphasized in meticulous detail, revealing a constructed self-fashioned to mirror Western beauty standards. The invocation of Garbo as both muse and deity underscores the totalizing effect of colonial aesthetics on Monina's psyche. Her performative identity, signified by her nickname "GG," emerges as a form of internalized colonial mimicry—a desire not just to imitate but to embody the colonizer's ideal of femininity.

This identity performance is set in motion—literally and figuratively—on the train. Her journey is as much psychological as it is geographical. The rhythmic movement of the train, the persistent ticking of the clock, and the piercing whistle serve as temporal and sensory markers that dislocate Monina from her Hollywood-infused fantasies and relocate her within the disjointed realities of colonial subjecthood. This aligns with what Foucault (1986) refers to as "spatial affectivity," (enhanced by Papastergiadis (2006)), the idea that spaces shaped by colonial infrastructures

produce distinct emotional registers. The train here does not promise arrival or resolution; instead, it enacts emotional turbulence, as Monina is propelled through a modernity that displaces more than it fulfills.

*Aakyat sa Bagyo si Greta Garbo! Nasabi sa sarili ni Monina Vargas nang mapaghusay ang pagkaupo sa isang silid na "primera" ng "express" na patungo sa hilaga ng umagang yaon..*

*...ang nasabi uli sa sarili sabay tingin sa orasang platino na nasa pulso ng kaliwa niyang kamay. Nakita niyang noo'y 7:45 na ng umaga.*

(Rosario, 1995: 63)

Greta Garbo is going up to Bagyo! Monina Vargas thought to herself as she arranged her seat in a first-class compartment of the express train heading north early that morning...

...she said to herself again, then glanced at the platinum watch on her left wrist. She saw that it was already 7:45 in the morning.

The seemingly mundane gesture of checking the time acquires symbolic weight. The platinum watch—an imported luxury—becomes a material index of modern temporality and colonial aspiration. It signifies Monina's embeddedness in a Western system of measurement and discipline, contrasting sharply with indigenous, cyclical conceptions of time. Her reference to herself as "Greta Garbo" signals the deep psychological assimilation of this colonial rhythm and identity, further blurring the lines between self and simulation.

Bhabha's (1994) theory of mimicry—wherein the colonized subject becomes "almost the same, but not quite"—is vividly realized in Monina's unstable positioning. Her attempt to inhabit the identity of a Hollywood icon reflects a longing for inclusion within the colonial imaginary. However, this inclusion is always conditional, always incomplete. Her identity is built on approximation, never full assimilation, creating a dissonant state of selfhood. This is echoed in Cruz's (2019) notion of "emulative anxiety," which describes the emotional tension experienced by colonial subjects who internalize the desire to emulate, even as they remain structurally excluded from what they imitate.

Thus, the train encapsulates the paradox of colonial modernity: it promises progress

and transformation but delivers alienation and fragmentation. Monina's experience on the train mirrors the colonial condition itself—structured around motion without destination, mimicry without mastery, and desire without fulfillment. In this way, the heterotopic space of the train becomes a crucible for colonial disillusionment, dramatizing the psychological cost of mobility in a world shaped by imperial ideals.

### **Distance as a Metaphor for Psychological Displacement**

The geographical distance between Manila and Baguio (Bagyo) in "Greta Garbo" functions as more than a backdrop for the story's events—it operates as a profound metaphor for emotional dislocation and psychological fragmentation under colonial modernity. This spatial divide reinforces the symbolic tension between aspiration and alienation, revealing how space in colonial narratives is imbued with ideological weight. Manila, characterized by its congestion, noise, and cosmopolitan excess, emerges as a chaotic site of colonial imposition—an urban space restructured to reflect the ambitions of American imperialism. It represents a space of overdetermined modernity, where indigenous identities are submerged beneath layers of Western influence, surveillance, and spectacle.

In contrast, Baguio—constructed by the Americans as a hill station and imagined as a site of rejuvenation and order—serves as a symbolic "promised land," a utopic vision of colonial escape and emotional resolution (Soriano, 2014). Situated literally and figuratively at a higher elevation, Baguio is cast as a place apart from the colonial clutter of Manila, offering a fantasy of clarity, romance, and renewal. However, this idealization is destabilized as the narrative unfolds. Rather than representing a space of fulfillment, Baguio becomes the location of Monina's disillusionment, rendering the journey one of false hope and broken illusion.

*Nalimutan niyang isang sipol na lamang at tuloy-tuloy na ang "express" sa Bagyo. Iniurong sa loob ang katawan ni Monina at dinampot ang pahayagan. Kamukha ni John Gilbert ang lalaki... Sapagkat kamukha ni John Gilbert ay kamukha rin ni Octavio. Binasa niya ang itaas na balita: MAG-ASWANG MAGDARAOS NG PIGING DAHIL*

*SA UNANG TAON NG KANILANG PAGKAKASAL.*

(Rosario, 1995:73)

She forgot that with just one whistle, the express train to Baguio (Bagyo) would already be on its way. Monina pulled her body back inside and picked up the newspaper. The man looked like John Gilbert... Because someone who looked like John Gilbert also looked like Octavio. She read the headline: COUPLE TO HOLD A FEAST TO CELEBRATE THEIR FIRST WEDDING ANNIVERSARY.

The moment Monina reads the newspaper on the train and discovers that Octavio, her imagined romantic partner, is already married marks a pivotal point of narrative collapse. The newspaper, a quintessential symbol of modernity and mass circulation, confronts her with the inescapable realities she had been trying to transcend. The very space she imagined would bring emotional coherence instead delivers psychological rupture. Her gesture of pulling her body back into the train car, physically retreating in the moment of emotional shock, symbolizes the abrupt reversal of her expectations and underscores the bodily experience of betrayal.

The spatial gap between the two cities thus becomes a metaphor for Monina's internal fracture. Her northbound movement—toward Baguio and toward what she perceives as romantic and personal closure—is not simply linear or geographical. It is a movement propelled by colonial fantasy: the belief that through physical relocation, one might access emotional fulfillment and self-actualization within the logic of Americanized modernity. However, this narrative arc reveals that such aspirations are built on illusions. The promise of upward mobility, both literal (via elevation) and symbolic (via love and beauty), is structurally unattainable for the colonized subject.

This affective geography resonates with Bastin & Benda (1968) argument that colonial infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia created zones of desire, urban and spatial constructs that promised transformation but in practice reinforced social stratification and psychological alienation. The construction of places like Baguio was part of a broader colonial strategy to simulate progress while maintaining control. In this context, Monina's journey is less a passage toward self-discovery than an enactment of what Cruz (2019) calls "colonial displacement through motion", a false

trajectory that masks the subject's exclusion from the very systems she aspires to enter.

Moreover, the illusion of distance as a solution is dismantled by the revelation that betrayal does not reside in one place but travels with her. Octavio, idealized as a romantic fantasy and symbolically linked to John Gilbert, is exposed as a figure shaped by the same colonial structures that shaped Monina. His betrayal is not personal but structural, embedded in the gendered and racialized dynamics of colonial desire. The headline she reads marks the collapse of both spatial and emotional illusions, confirming that mobility under empire often intensifies fragmentation rather than resolving it.

Ultimately, the Manila–Baguio trajectory illustrates the spatialized effect of colonial modernity: a movement through colonially scripted landscapes that promise healing or wholeness but instead amplify feelings of dispossession. For Monina, the journey underscores the impossibility of emotional coherence within an ideological system designed to perpetuate mimicry, exclusion, and unfulfillment. The train ride, therefore, not only fails to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality but also widens it, exposing the emotional cost of believing that distance can mend the colonial wound.

## **Colonial Fantasy, Cultural Icons, and the Crisis of Identity**

### **Monina Vargas and the Mirage of Mimicry**

Monina's idolization of Greta Garbo functions as a powerful metaphor for the internalized processes of colonial mimicry, where the colonized subject seeks symbolic inclusion within a Westernized cultural paradigm by adopting the colonizer's aesthetics, mannerisms, and emotional registers. Her deliberate emulation of Garbo's beauty, poise, and romantic affectations reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as the "almost the same, but not quite" condition of mimicry—a mode of imitation that appears to promise proximity to the colonial ideal yet always maintains an unbridgeable gap between the imitator and the original. For Monina, this gap manifests not only in her inability to fully "become" Garbo but also in the deep sense of alienation produced by this unattainable aspiration.

Her identity becomes an ongoing performance, an embodied script written by Hollywood's visual

grammar and colonial pedagogy. She is not merely inspired by Garbo but is attempting to inhabit her entirely, reshaping her physical presentation, her emotional expressions, and even her interpersonal desires in alignment with imported ideals. This performance, however, is precarious—it depends on external validation, and it fractures when confronted with the limits of colonial inclusion. Her eventual collapse—both literal, in her fall from the train platform, and figurative, in her psychological breakdown—marks the rupture of this colonial illusion, revealing that the rewards of mimicry are illusory and its costs profound.

Recent feminist postcolonial scholarship foregrounds the gendered nature of this mimicry, noting that colonial modernity did not impose its ideals in a neutral way but targeted women's bodies and identities as sites of ideological inscription. Soriano (2014) and Khoo (2007) argue that Filipinas during the American colonial period were particularly vulnerable to the internalization of Hollywood's beauty norms, which were both racialized and gendered, privileging Euro-American features while marginalizing indigenous aesthetics. Such cultural imports not only displaced traditional conceptions of femininity but also created a hierarchy of desirability that placed Filipina women in a perpetual state of insufficiency.

Within this framework, Monina's eventual bruised face assumes heightened symbolic significance. It is more than a narrative detail of physical injury—it becomes a visible record of what Rafael (2014) term "aesthetic trauma," the psychic and bodily toll of striving toward beauty standards rooted in imperialist frameworks. The bruise disrupts the carefully maintained facade of the "Garbo" persona, making visible the violence—both literal and structural—underpinning her colonial self-fashioning. It is as if her body itself refuses the role it has been assigned, revealing the unsustainable nature of her performed identity.

This moment of physical disfigurement also marks a turning point in the narrative's critique of mimicry. The injury strips away the mask of colonial glamour and exposes the raw, unadorned subject beneath—a subject who can no longer hide behind cinematic illusions. In this way, Monina's fall becomes not simply a scene of personal defeat but an embodied moment of truth, a rupture that allows the narrative to

confront the impossibility of full assimilation into the colonial ideal. By linking Monina's personal crisis to the larger structures of gendered colonialism, Rosario's story underscores how mimicry, far from being a path to empowerment, is a mechanism of entrapment that reproduces the very hierarchies it seems to challenge.

### **Octavio Razon and the Gendered Mirage of Modernity**

Octavio Razon emerges in "Greta Garbo" not as a fully realized character but as a projection of idealized colonial masculinity—constructed as much from imported cinematic archetypes as from lived reality. In Monina's fantasy, he is her John Gilbert, the romantic counterpart to her self-fashioned Garbo, completing the Hollywood-inspired tableau she has built around her desires. This pairing is not coincidental: it reflects the colonial imagination's power to script relationships along the lines of Western media's gendered tropes, with the man as gallant, urbane, and socially mobile, and the woman as beautiful, refined, and ultimately dependent on male validation.

Yet Octavio's betrayal—delivered with brutal impersonality through a newspaper headline—exposes him as an empty vessel of these same fantasies, revealing the hollowness at the core of colonial masculinity. The choice of the newspaper as the medium of revelation is significant. As an emblem of colonial modernity, the newspaper embodies the reach of mass media, public performance, and information circulation—all tools that shape how desire, romance, and betrayal are staged in a modern colonial setting. It strips the revelation of intimacy, transforming Monina's heartbreak into a public fact, as if even private romantic disillusionment must be mediated by colonial technologies of communication.

Octavio's role in the story underscores that colonial modernity reshapes not only spatial and economic structures but also the very terms of gender relations. Tolentino (2001) notes that American colonial influence in the Philippines redefined masculinity, tying it to conspicuous consumption, Westernized etiquette, and public performance in the arena of modern romance. In this model, masculinity is not rooted in indigenous values of kinship or communal responsibility but in the ability to embody cosmopolitan sophistication—an ability accessible only to those who can navigate the colonial social order's hierarchies.

From this perspective, Octavio is less a man than a performance of a man—a curated image that exists primarily in the field of Monina's imagination, sustained by the cinematic scripts she has internalized. His betrayal is therefore not merely personal treachery but structural inevitability: he, too, is caught within the web of colonial mimicry, bound to enact a role that is both alluring and exclusionary. The same imperial framework that encourages Monina to aspire to Garbo's beauty compels Octavio to perform a Gilbert-like masculinity—one that gains prestige through appearance and detachment rather than emotional reciprocity.

Octavio's abandonment of Monina encapsulates the double-bind of colonial romance: it invites emulation of Western romantic ideals but withholds their promised fulfillment, particularly from those—like Monina—who occupy socially and racially marginalized identities. His presence in the narrative thus becomes a mirror that reflects not only Monina's illusions but also the broader fragility of gendered performances under empire. In the end, both are actors in a drama authored by colonial modernity, a script in which connection is always compromised, and desire is always deferred.

### **From Illusion to Disillusionment: A Postcolonial Awakening**

#### **Monina's Journey to Consciousness**

Monina's trajectory in "Greta Garbo"—from imitation of colonial ideals to their eventual rejection—unfolds as a deeply psychological narrative of decolonization. It vividly embodies what Fanon (1952) terms *epidermalization*: the process by which the colonized internalizes the colonizer's aesthetic and cultural values, inscribing them onto the very surface of the self. This is not merely the adoption of a style but the embedding of a hierarchy of worth, wherein beauty, sophistication, and even romantic fulfillment are imagined to reside in alignment with Western standards. For Monina, the train journey to Baguio represents an emotional investment in the belief that colonial modernity can deliver on its promises—that distance, elevation, and alignment with imported ideals will lead to personal completion.

However, the journey does not culminate in fulfillment; instead, it exposes the systemic impossibility of sustaining the colonial fantasy. The

revelation of Octavio's marriage, delivered with the cold authority of a newspaper headline, ruptures the delicate edifice of her constructed identity. This disillusionment is not simply the collapse of a personal dream but the shattering of a worldview—one that had been meticulously cultivated through media, social interactions, and the infrastructures of colonial life.

Her physical fall as she disembarks from the train becomes a potent metaphor for this rupture. The act of losing her footing literalizes the destabilization of her sense of self. The moment is a bodily punctuation mark in the story, signaling the transition from aspiration to awareness. Cruz (2019) describes such moments as a return to the "affective core of resistance"—an awakening born not from triumph but from the emotional devastation that makes continued participation in the colonial script untenable.

Monina's disfigured appearance in the aftermath of her fall further deepens the symbolic resonance of the scene. The bruise on her face is not simply a marker of physical injury but a visible rejection of the flawless beauty ideal she had sought to embody. It becomes an involuntary act of resistance: her body refuses the performance it has been tasked to sustain. In this way, her injury marks a threshold moment, transforming what could be read as defeat into the necessary precondition for reclaiming agency.

This shift from illusion to disillusionment mirrors a broader postcolonial awakening, where the recognition of the colonial system's exclusions catalyzes the possibility of resistance. While Monina's transformation remains muted—Rosario offers no triumphant reclamation of indigenous identity—the story suggests that disillusionment itself is a form of empowerment. It forces the recognition that colonial promises are structurally designed to fail, and in this recognition lies the first step toward imagining alternatives beyond mimicry and subjugation.

### **The Role of Time and Transport in Postcolonial Disillusionment**

Rosario's critique of colonial modernity finds its most precise symbolic articulation in the intertwined mechanisms of transport and time. In "Greta Garbo", the train is not merely a vehicle that carries Monina from Manila to Baguio—it is a conduit for a particular colonial temporality, one that is rigid, linear, and industrial, supplanting the cyclical and communal

rhythms of precolonial and early colonial Filipino life. Unlike the *kalesa* or other traditional modes of transport, which were embedded in local spatial practices and allowed for organic pauses, the train imposes an inexorable timetable, a cadence that demands compliance and leaves little room for deviation (Anderson, 2006). This is modernity in its most mechanical and disciplinary form: a system that moves bodies not at the will of their own narratives, but according to the imperatives of progress as defined by the colonizer.

For Monina, being propelled forward on the train is emblematic of her subjection to a modernity that she neither initiates nor fully comprehends. The motion of the train strips her of temporal agency—she cannot choose the speed, the stops, or the direction once the journey has begun. In this way, the journey dramatizes what Rafael (2014) and Göttsche (2019) identify in postcolonial fiction as the motif of mobility without mastery: a critique of the loss of personal autonomy within globalized systems that promise freedom while structuring dependence. Monina's passage northward is thus a form of temporal conscription, in which her own desires are subordinated to a schedule and a spatial trajectory scripted by colonial infrastructure.

Time itself becomes complicit in this process. The precision of her platinum watch, a status object rooted in Western luxury culture, signals her internalization of a foreign temporal order. In aligning herself with this time—measured in minutes, marked by deadlines—Monina unknowingly surrenders to a discipline that prioritizes efficiency, punctuality, and forward motion over reflection, connection, or rootedness. The ticking clock on her wrist mirrors the relentless rhythm of the train, both working in tandem to propel her toward an anticipated future that proves to be illusory.

Her final realization—that the desires animating her journey were shaped by systems designed to exclude her—marks a critical turning point in the narrative. This moment fuses personal pain with political awakening: Monina comes to see that the same infrastructures promising connection, opportunity, and modern refinement also function as instruments of estrangement. The train's forward thrust parallels the ideological momentum of colonialism itself, which frames its incursions as progress while eroding the agency and coherence of those it carries along.

In this sense, "Greta Garbo" offers a trenchant meditation on the paradox of colonial mobility. The very technologies that signify advancement—the train, the clock, the newspaper—are revealed as double-edged, offering movement while scripting exclusion, promising modernity while delivering dislocation. Rosario's narrative captures the enduring tension between the allure of Western modernity and the lived realities of postcolonial subjugation, reminding us that in the colonial timetable, the destination is never truly one's own.

## CONCLUSION

Deogracias A. Rosario's "Greta Garbo" offers a powerful reflection on the fractured psyche of the Filipino under American colonial modernity. Beneath its surface story of love and betrayal lies a deeper allegory of a nation split between memory and aspiration, tradition and the imported promise of progress. Monina Vargas's journey from Manila to Baguio becomes more than a change of place—it echoes the colonial subject's movement toward a modernity that dazzles with possibility but ends in disenchantment.

At its heart, the story examines the tension between imitation and identity within the machinery of colonial rule. Through education, infrastructure, and cinema, American occupation reshaped the Filipino sense of self according to Western ideals of beauty, discipline, and success. The train that carries Monina northward is both literal and symbolic: it represents a colonial timeline that moves forward relentlessly, leaving little room for agency or understanding.

Monina's fascination with the figure of Greta Garbo and her entanglement with Octavio Razon reveal how colonial desire is learned and performed. The allure of American modernity—glamorous, cinematic, and perpetually just out of reach—creates a cycle of longing and alienation. Monina's eventual fall signals more than personal tragedy; it speaks to the painful realization that the colonial dream cannot be fulfilled.

The story's gender dynamics deepen this critique. Monina's beauty, vulnerability, and eventual disfigurement expose how colonialism scripted femininity through ideals of whiteness, restraint, and emotional control. Her bruised face becomes a haunting emblem of what it costs to internalize these imposed standards. Octavio, on the other hand,

embodies the colonial male figure—charming yet hollow, mimicking sophistication while remaining complicit in the very structures that oppress him. Their failed relationship mirrors the broader imbalance of power under empire. Set against the backdrop of early twentieth-century modernization, "Greta Garbo" reveals how colonial progress promised liberation but instead entrenched dependence. The rhythm of the train and the ticking of Monina's watch echo the imposition of Western time—an alien tempo that erases native rhythms and narrows the space for self-determination.

In the story's final moments, Monina's collapse marks a transformation. Her stillness becomes a form of resistance, her pain a moment of clarity. Through this "aesthetic of trauma," Rosario uncovers the truth of colonial modernity: that movement under empire propels but does not free. Revisiting "Greta Garbo" through postcolonial and feminist perspectives underscores how Philippine literature of the American period remains an archive of resistance—revealing the contradictions of modernity and gesturing toward healing through the hard light of disillusionment.

## STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

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