

PORNO

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Abstract

This article consists of “Porno,” an English translation of a Thai short story titled “หนังโป๊” by Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa, and an introduction explicating literary and cultural issues that arise from the translation process. First published in 2018 in an ad-hoc anthology to fundraise for families of Thai political prisoners, the story captures the atmosphere of political repression—masked as depression—in Bangkok after the death of King Bhumibol in 2016, as refracted through the character of an overseas Filipino worker named Angele, herself no stranger to political repression. The connection between Thailand and the Philippines begins at the story’s inception: the Thai writer was inspired by a scene in Lav Diaz’s film *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2005). In the translation process, the translator encounters issues of ambiguity both in representing gender and in representing political repression. The question is whether to reproduce the stylistic ambiguity in translation or, rather, to accentuate the story’s cultural specificity. The translator invites readers from the Philippines to be the judge of the story and its translation. What nourishment can this Thai story give in a Philippine context? Is the story’s portrayal of repression too generic? Are “Lola” and “Tatay” too stereotypical? Does the story, in seizing upon the political and economic decay common to the two countries, blunder into the territory of poverty or trauma porn?

Keywords

agender, ambiguity, interculturalism, Filipino-ness, translation

About the Translator

Peera Songkunnatham is a non-binary writer and translator from Sisaket City, northeastern Thailand, who lives in Indianapolis, the United States of America. Peera has a Bachelor of Arts from Swarthmore College with a major in anthropology and minors in Spanish and

interpretation theory. Peera is the Archivist at the Siddhi-Issara Foundation and is the Editor-in-Chief of *Sanam Ratsadon: An Archive of Common[er] Feelings*, a website which curates historic Thai writings, art performances, speeches, and interviews in English translation. Peera's literary essays and translations have appeared on *Asymptote Journal*, *Mekong Review*, *Boston Review*, *New Mandala*, *The Jugaad Project*, among others.

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

I did not realize until after I finished translating the following short story that the narrator character is probably genderqueer. “Isn’t the story lesbian?” my husband asked after reading my translation. “No, the narrator uses the pronoun *pom*; he’s a man. Well, not necessarily a cisgender man, I guess. Maybe a man with a vagina. Right. . . .” That’s when it dawned on me. Cryptic descriptions in the story’s sex scene finally clicked: “our moist bushes touch and brush against each other without being able to devour each other The rivers within us that do not give birth.” I realized that the narrator who uses the generally masculine first-person Thai pronoun *pom* may be a transgender man or a butch lesbian woman or an agender individual. This late realization—coming from someone who identifies as non-binary, no less!—points to a possible variation of what Norman Erikson Pasaribu calls the “gender-reveal party” genre in Indonesian queer love stories, where third-person gender-ignoring pronouns in Indonesian are a literary device of ambiguity, leaving the gender of the characters unspecified until the revelatory end.¹ What this Thai-language story does, on the flip-side, is use a gender-specific pronoun in ways that confuse the reader’s narrow imagination with the hope to expand it by means of an eventual “(a)gender-reveal” in the reader’s mind.

Ambiguity, and not only in terms of gender and sexuality, is a key stylistic feature of this short story in translation entitled “Porno” written by Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa, a writer and critic also known as Filmsick. The story forms part of a series of fragments published in novel form as *84 Paragraphs of Consolations* (P.S. Publishing, 2020) revolving around the first-person character of indeterminate gender in a variety of sex scenes.

Is it important to ensure that the ambiguity is retained or reproduced in translation? I will suggest that No: in English translation, ambiguity is the very feature that may obscure the merit of this story rather than enrich it.

Originally, the choice to translate this story was political. It first appeared as one of the five stories of the collection *ขอศาลพิจารณาพิพากษาลงโทษตามกฎหมาย* (*May the Court Consider Delivering A Guilty Verdict in Accordance with the Dogs’ Law*, Tamnak Press, 2018) published to raise funds for families of Thai political prisoners.² Years passed; urgency shifted. Published at a time when openly criticizing the Thai monarchy’s role in politics was sure to invite social shunning, if not outright persecution, the collection, quite a courageous statement then, quite a departure then from the five authors’ usually oblique political engagement in their literary output, seems quaintly elliptical today. A reader wrote of the book in 2021, “I’d bought this because I wanted to help raise funds for the families of prosecuted Red Shirts back in ’18, but I got around to reading it too late. Just three years later, the

political struggle has pushed the ceiling so far up that this book's stories encoded in layers upon layers of symbolism no longer have as much power as straight talk"³. For all its literary devices of ambiguity, the book has fallen out of political style.

Rereading Wiwat's story recently, I found its description of "the Great Death" to be super evocative of the oppressive climate of Thai society in the aftermath of the death in 2017 of King Bhumibol, who had reigned the supposedly democratic kingdom since 1946:

The death that expands soundlessly; the death that really happened only once, but happens in perpetuity in the minds of millions. The color black is ubiquitous; worry occupies the space between silences of leaving things unsaid. [. . .]

People drop dead in succession. In order to add to the greatness of that great death, the count includes those who died of grief, those who died of road accidents resulting from absent-mindedness, those who died of chronic conditions after they stopped taking their medications out of listlessness. The Great Death becomes attached to an alarming statistical figure. The state, however, has no energy to fix this deadliness. The generals sit around in air-conditioned silence, terrified that death might come knocking on the door.

Should a fictional story's connection to an actual death of national significance be spelled out to foreign readers? My husband, unaware of this connection, found the Great Death to be evocative of the COVID-19 pandemic. Does this evocation attest to the enrichment of interpretation induced by ambiguity, or to the impoverishment of experience induced by the pandemic? I fear that it might be more of the latter than the former. When anything and everything recalls one of the ever-present present moment, a culturally distinct monstrosity, even one in recent memory, may fail to register. Yes, I am calling King Bhumibol's death a monstrosity: the compulsory year-long mourning period silenced any domestic dissent and any reckoning of his reign's legacy on the country's democratic backsliding. If I cannot make explicit this real connection in the story's setting—by way of an introduction like this, for example—I'd see no real reason to translate and propagate this story. Without it, the story will likely seem ungrounded from any reality, even hopelessly sophomoric in its vague airs of death.

Another striking quality of the story is the foreigner status of the protagonist. The story opens with her name: "Angele got out of there the day the new president was officially sworn in." Got out of where? The story eventually lets on: the Philippines. Where in the Philippines? A slum, probably in Manila, as her father who was from Mindanao moved there and died there in a protest against Marcos. (Which Marcos? A future reader may ask, but that's a different matter about our histories and their deceptively cyclical patterns).

In more ways than one, this translation of “Porno” helps bring the story back to its source. According to the author, the story was inspired by a scene in Lav Diaz’s *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2005). To translate it to English for publication in the Philippines, therefore, can be seen as a kind of back-translation. A translation is, at its best, an afterlife that reveals new, surprising aspects of the original as well as a source of nourishment for users of the target language. I follow Carolyn Shread’s model of translation as metramorphosis, which posits that the original work and its translation nourish each other in a matrixial or womb-like borderspace.⁴ Rather than obsessing over equivalence between two opposed poles, Shread’s own translation practice brings out implicit or hidden aspects of the original to the fore for the sake of a potential reading demographic. In her translation of Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Les rapaces* (1986) from French to English, Shread includes Haitian Creole terms and phrases absent in the original in order to make the work immediately relatable to descendants of Haitian immigrants in the United States who have no access to their literary heritage written in French.

In “Porno,” the aforementioned (a)gender-reveal of the narrator character induced by the affordances of the first-person English pronoun “I” is an example of nourishment in translation, albeit an accidental one. But I also brought out something deliberately through another kind of pronouns: I added Filipino specificity into the text by translating the Thai terms of familial address *yaa* (paternal grandmother) and *paw* (father) into “Lola” and “Tatay,” respectively. This choice makes sense on an intercultural basis, too, as both Thais and Filipinos have a tendency to use familial terms as pronouns or as honorifics to address people inside and outside the family.

Let us deliberate on this choice to use the terms “Lola” and “Tatay.” Aren’t these Filipino words too obscure to many English readers? My white American husband didn’t know them, and as a result missed some details of the already detail-thin story. This does not worry me too much, as I think it is a good thing for people to pick up new words. *Google’s* English dictionary, provided by Oxford Languages, now lists “Lola” as an English word, in fact.⁵

But, my bigger concern, aren’t these Filipino words too generic to many Filipinos? Do people from Mindanao necessarily use the terms “Lola” and “Tatay”? Is it an undue assumption to use such stereotypical national terms of address? Or is it possible that, like the story’s narrator who uses a masculine pronoun without being what the reader may picture as male, the Overseas Filipino Worker is using Filipino terms of address without conforming to what the reader may picture as Filipino-ness?

These questions are part of why I, ignorant of the answers, am submitting this story for the critical consideration of readers in the Philippines. What nourishment can this Thai story in translation give in a Philippine context? In the portrayal of sexing through political trauma, what light does “Porno” shed on the possibilities of commensurability between two Southeast Asian countries? Does the story, in seizing upon the political and economic decay common to the two countries, blunder into the territory of poverty or trauma porn?

Notes

1. Pasaribu, Norman Erikson and Tiffany Tsao. "Does a face need a mask?: In English, you choose to be gender-neutral. In Indonesian, it's a gift from the language." *AAWW: The Margins*, 20 Mar. 2019, <https://aaww.org/does-a-face-need-a-mask/>
2. Songkunnatham, Peera. "Book Review: May the Court Consider Delivering a Guilty Verdict in Accordance with the Dogs' Law." *New Mandala*, 15 Aug. 2018, [https://www.newmandala.org/book-review/may-court-consider-delivering-guilty-verdict-accordance-dogs-law-ขอศาลได้พิจารณาพิพากษา/](https://www.newmandala.org/book-review/may-court-consider-delivering-guilty-verdict-accordance-dogs-law-ขอศาลได้พิจารณาพิพากษาลงโทษตามกฎหมาย/)
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4. Shread, Carolyn. "Metamorphosis or Metramorphosis? Towards a Feminist Ethics of Difference in Translation," *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* (20:2, 2007), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ttr/2007-v20-n2-ttr2396/018825ar/>
5. "Lola *noun* PHILIPPINES 1. a grandmother. 'I treasure the times I got to spend time with my lola' used as a polite title or form of address for an elderly woman. 'I attended a birthday party for Lola Eva,' " <https://www.google.com/search?q=lola+meaning>, accessed 28 Jan. 2023.

PORNO**Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa**

Angele got out of there the day the new president was officially sworn in. Her country has elected a bloodthirsty madman to administer the country. She has no remaining attachments to this country apart from her four-year-old daughter who lives with her mom in a slum, the daughter who she tells others is her younger sister.

She got here in the aftermath of the Great Death, the death that remains undying. Listlessness hangs in the air, drifting above the people in this city. The death that expands soundlessly; the death that really happened only once, but happens in perpetuity in the minds of millions. The color black is ubiquitous; worry occupies the space between silences of leaving things unsaid.

She took a job as a receptionist at a recently opened guest house in the historical center. That place is a three-story building on a narrow street corner. The right-hand alley leads to the river that remains calm and still as if it was long dead. The left-side street stretches over several other mini-alleys and mini-streets, a cross-connecting, overlapping, interpenetrating system like that of endlessly linked tree roots that appear only partially above ground. Across the street is a repair shop for some machinery she's not familiar with. Everything has a sheen of viscous black; expired motor oil streaks the shop floor and oozes onto the sidewalk. Every time she arrives for the morning shift, she smells the breath of machines, alive, rotting away awaiting repair in the dying city.

People drop dead in succession. In order to add to the greatness of that great death, the count includes those who died of grief, those who died of road accidents resulting from absent-mindedness, those who died of chronic conditions after they stopped taking their medications out of listlessness. The Great Death becomes attached to an alarming statistical figure. The state, however, has no energy to fix this deadliness. The generals sit around in air-conditioned silence, terrified that death might come knocking on the door.

She feels alive, because she is a stranger in this city. In the city she left behind, real death happens on the streets. Rioters get counted among nameless corpses of criminals, as if the country's poor were all drug dealers and must be corralled and eliminated like street dogs. Here, on the other hand, people die by themselves just like that, as if death had splendor, were a kind of show, a self-sacrifice for a higher purpose: dying as a kind of exquisite sacrificial offering.

She doesn't think she will be infected by the Great Death, living as she does on the same side as the machines awaiting repair in the shop in the small alley in front of her guest house. A soundless wait. Every night she dreams of her dad, who had died during anti-dictatorship protests, walking up to her from an avenue that once teemed with people gathering to topple dictatorship.

Tatay was stabbed during the big protest. He had just gotten out of jail after being arrested in a protest parade. Tatay was simply standing in a daze in the middle of the avenue, stumped by the thought that perhaps his life was really just a joke in between the jail for intellectuals and the cursed paddies of Lola where nothing could grow, the paddies his siblings had to go to by foot day in, day out to sow hopelessness. Some of his siblings were sent to work as servants for the rich in the city hoping for a better life, in vain. Tatay found it amusing that his life was no better than that of a younger sister of his who'd gone mad. One sunny day she took her son with her plunging to the abyss. No one found her son's body, and she became an urban legend drifting in the air. The poor turn into ghosts after death; the rich turn into gods, ensconced and inscribed in beautiful churches of the city center. As for Tatay, he'd long lived in the abyss.

Tatay walked home with the stab wound, hands covering belly and mouth shut. He walked a long distance on the streets of Manila, equal to the one walked by his siblings from the village to the paddies in Mindanao. A return home to learned suffering. After that walk, Tatay collapsed and died without a sound on the street. His body was dragged to join the heap of bodies, but in death he continued walking back to her. It took years before Marcos was driven out of power. But the country never changed, and people continue to be murdered day in, day out.

An acquaintance of hers died by himself just like that: a night shift employee who didn't show up to work for three days was found as a corpse in the river. The cause of death was surmised, pathetically, to be depression induced by the Great Death. Looking for a hookup on an app, he went with a stranger who, like him, was cast adrift in the malady of death. No one knows what happened. No one has been able to find the other man. But his body was found drifting on the dead river.

Every death is going to become only one kind of death, she told me when we first met on Tinder.

She asked me to record a video clip for her as she undressed. Her tan skin showing traces of decay from dermatitis typical of a child raised in hardship. Her scattered scars. Her dark, enormous chest. Her rounded nipples' heavy-hanging bases cramming inside the phone camera. My puny chest, my nipples' ugly brown

bases slightly erect as I moisten. A Saturday night ripe with death; it pervades even our sexual relations for non-reproductive purposes.

Our brown lips, our brown nipples, and our moist bushes touch and brush against each other without being able to devour each other. Our naked, unattractive bodies. The rivers within us that do not give birth. No birth, so no death. My cam gets up close to her organ. It glints nakedly. She groans as if the electronic flash was fondling her. I never found her big, naked body alluring until I watch it on a mobile phone screen, until the groans are converted to a digital file, until each of us is in a room alone replaying it over and over: that's when we will actually thirst over it more than during the act.

She tells me about the death of her coworker. She says that if I die tonight of excessive lovemaking, I will be another one who dies in the Great Death. These lewd acts will be erased, ascended to a greater purpose. I have never encountered death even as the Great Death hangs in the air, as present as the riots on Mars or the discovery of black holes here and there. For me, the act of saying it makes it meaningful. To speak of death is to maintain death's existence. That night after another lovemaking session, she dreams of her dad walking right up to her, knife in hand. Tatay stabs her. I record clips of her nightmare spliced into our lovemaking. She may be dying. If she dies, she will not be counted as part of the Great Death. Just a death. She thrashes around in agony; I stand next to her bed, recording her until she calms down. A wait until she awakes, and then we'll make love again.