



A CONVERSATION WITH ANTON HUR

This transpired online from 8-11 September 2020.

B.B.P. HOSMILLO: Hello, Anton. Thank you again for your agreeing to be interviewed for Queer Southeast Asia. Before doing this interview, I made myself more familiar with your translation work and poetry, and listened to your other previous interviews. But preparing myself for this, I must say, is not easy as I am drowning in the injustice committed specifically against queer communities in the Philippines and generally the Filipino publics with the president pardoning US Marine Private First Class Joseph Scott Pemberton, who killed Jennifer Laude in 2014. At the night of the murder, he reportedly said to his friend that he might have killed a he-she in the following words: “I choked it, wrapped my arms around it until it stopped moving, and dragged it towards the bathroom.” The pain to be perceived as non-human. The pain to be shown that justice is not for queer bodies. The pain of having to see and be in this reality as an everyday experience of trauma. I guess I’d like us to begin with pain. A poignantly divided Korea; Korea with their living ghosts from its colonial past; Korea with its ambivalence toward queer public cultures; Korea with their own “impossibility” of recognising a political imaginary that includes queerness as a positive value—this is all pain. How is pain translatable? Has there been an instance in your work that pain was lost in translation?

ANTON HUR: I don’t think it’s an “impossibility” at all in Korea to recognize a political imaginary that includes queerness as a positive value, as you put it. My beliefs are quite the opposite. Last year’s bestselling work of literary fiction was a queer novel; I’m in the process of bringing it into the English market right now, and an American publisher asked me if it was an “underground hit” and I told him, No, it’s an *overground* hit. As a Korean queer person living in Korea, I feel very much that queer rights discourse has entered politics at least over ten years ago when the Anti-discrimination Bill was first drafted—I’ve lived in Korea as a Korean national for thirty years, and I can feel the changes in the air. We fought very hard for these changes, and I have been quite vocal about Western journalists pushing their white savior narratives, trying to portray Korean queer culture as one-dimensional and backward. Obviously we have problems, just like everyone else, but the negativity from the West in their portrayals of Korea is so relentless and reductive that frankly they do more harm than good at this point.

My thoughts on pain and translation are a bit more complicated. I’m not a naturally painful person (?) and I don’t exactly walk around thinking about how painful it is that Korea is divided, if you know what I mean. I’m sure such issues do affect me on some level, but consciously, it’s very abstracted for me most of the time. A pain I am more aware of is the distance I feel between my source and target languages. I can translate in either direction, and when I’m



in my target language, I'm always missing my source language. There's a kind of ache for it, a homesickness, a nostalgia. My friend and colleague Ben Francon Davies, a translator from Wales, introduced me to the Welsh idea of "hiraeth," and it's the closest word I've come across that describes what I feel when I translate. You can sense the beauty of the source text through the translation, but at the same time you're cut off from it and it's unreachable, and that combination of beauty and pain is what the affective experience of translation is like for me.

B.B.P.H.: You have translated Kang Kyeong-ae's *The Underground Village* and Kyung-Sook Shin's *The Court Dancer*, what are you working on now?

A.H.: I'm about to start translating Kyung-Sook Shin's next book in English. It's either going to be called *Violet* or *Violets*. I keep holding off the decision for some reason.

B.B.P.H.: Listening to your previews interviews, we now know that you have lived in a number of places such as Sweden, Ethiopia, and Thailand, and as you have put it you are "thoroughly Korean", having spent your adult life in Korea and served in the army as every Korean man. I presume that your experience of being (dis)located from Korea helped you understand diversity linguistically. But I wanted to know what particular moments that made you aspire to become a translator. What life conditions brought you to do what you are doing now? Were they politically inspired by queerness?

A.H.: I think for a lot of people with my background, you don't "become" a translator but kind of "fall into" it. Translation was a thing that I could do really well and easily, and people were willing to pay money for it and I like money. But as much as I like money, I'm very lazy about earning it, so I'm going to try to work with what I have to get it, as opposed to learning a new skill like working in finance or becoming a lawyer.

I'm trying to think of whether being gay had anything to do with it, there are actually quite a few queer translators. Something to do with the honesty of the work, where you're paid for your labor and no one cares what you do in your spare time? We're also really good at mimicking others—we have to be, to survive—which makes us natural translators of context, not just language? I'm sure someone has figured this out by now.

You mentioned the army; the Korean military has had many issues with queer conscripts, and there is an actual "anti-sodomy" statute in Korean military law, but the great majority of gay men in my life did fine in the military. Or that we don't seem any more traumatized than the straights? My time there made me think, gays are so good at performing heteronormativity that we "do normative" better than the normatives. There are actually a lot of queer people in militaries around the world. I could kind of see why.



B.B.P.H.: Is translation a practice of activism?

A.H.: Translation may be the purest form of activism.

B.B.P.H.: How do you say this?

A.H.: What do you think of when you think of activism? What does it mean to be an activist? What does it take to advocate for the other in the language of the other? Also consider that activism takes many forms and virtually all of them involve language.

B.B.P.H.: I surmise from your previous interviews that you don't talk to authors whose works you are translating. When my first poetry book was translated into Vietnamese by Nha Thuyen and Hai Yen, I don't remember either of them asking me about my work. I believe that is a form of power translators must preserve. In reading *Queering Modernist Translation: The Poetics of Race, Gender, and Queerness* (2020), Christian Bancroft mentioned William Spurlin's essay *Queering Translation: Rethinking Gender and Sexual Politics in the Spaces between Languages* in which the latter argues for translation as a practice of bringing difference into life against hegemonically defined spaces, expanding both queerness and translation into something beyond a clamour for gender rights and rendering a literary piece in another language with the right words, respectively. As someone who has been living in Korea for more than three years now, I can describe Korea as "insular" and "monolithic" the same way I would Japan. And mostly I feel the concept of difference is not taken seriously or depoliticised. How is your translation practice rupturing this pervasive concept of normalcy, that to be a Korean is to either to be this or that and nothing else? How difficult is it to carry out this kind of radical endless project?

A.H.: I find any position that finds Korea (or Japan) "insular" to be . . . not in line with my own experience? Korea is not the center of the world, it is a little country squashed between the globe's biggest superpowers: the US, China, Russia, and Japan. We can't afford to be insular. The last time we tried insularity as a policy, we got colonized. Korea depends heavily on its ability to stay within the global economy and transnational discourse, that's why the government pays me money to translate novels, of all things. And the concept of difference is taken so seriously in Korean society that the Korean right wing viciously attacks all forms of Korean diversity: look at the homophobic protests during Seoul Pride, look at the astonishing hostility they showed for the handful of Syrian refugees who made it to Korea recently. This idea of a monolithic Korea is right-wing propaganda, which keeps finding life in Western depictions of Korea because it fits their racist perspective of all Asians looking and thinking the same.



I don't talk to my authors not because I'm trying to preserve some kind of reading or power but because I generally understand what my authors are saying. I am, like, *not too bad* at translating, to be honest. And the authors whom I consider "my" authors—Jeon Sam-hye, Kyung-Sook Shin, Bora Chung, Sang Young Park, Kim Un, to name a few—are already "bringing difference into life against hegemonically defined spaces." My biggest contribution to their already existent efforts was to choose to translate them. In the translating itself, I follow their lead. Writers like Jeon Sam-hye or Bora Chung, they don't need me to help them "rupture the pervasive concept of normalcy," they're already doing a great job rupturing and disrupting on their own. Which is why I'm so incredibly proud and excited to bring their work into English to introduce them to a new audience, to spawn new readings.

B.B.P.H.: Let us talk about the world of Korean Literature as cultural production, particularly Korean Literature in English, or more specifically Korean Queer Literature in English. I have two questions in this regard and I encourage you to expound on the keywords I mentioned if you want. First has to do with the "otherness" that is, I think, almost present in any creative practice that queers the norm. Is Korean Queer Literature in English at the margins of Korean academe or society at large? Second has to do with race. When I was studying Japanese Literature in Tokyo, I had to read all my texts in English translation. My professor was also a translator. She translated Nobel Prize-winner Yasunari Kawabata's novel *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*. Later on, I realised that all of the translators whose works contributed greatly to my development were all white. Considering how racialised literature and creative writing could be, it would not be difficult for me to think that a white translator bringing their translation into life and telling the world "this is literature" could easily gain a yeses in contrast to people of colour doing the same thing, especially in Southeast and East Asia. Have you ever dealt with issues of race in your work? How has the practice of translation developed your sense of ownership or perhaps authority in using English?

A.H.: I would say Korean queer literature in English is at the leading edge of all English-translated Korean literature—marginal, but at the front? As for the second question, I've always felt like my languages were mine, that I was constantly moving from country to country but the one thing that I could take with me were my languages. My languages were the real countries that I lived in. In my work, when I imagine a Korean reader or an English reader, I'm imagining myself. Not that I don't get microaggressions over my English, but come on, I sound like *this* in English. I've won PEN grants transatlantically. The only thing I've learned about racism through translation is that a lot of translators are racist.

B.B.P.H.: I think translation is also a process of eternally knowing the original/mother/first language one is translating from. What have you learned about Korean language in regards to gender and expression of sexuality?



A.H.: That Korean is *so much more superior* to English when it comes to gender and expression of sexuality. Pronouns are not gendered, you can drop subjects, postpositions can be manipulated to easily create double meanings, there's a long and rich literary tradition of gender and sexuality diversity. It's a language built for the future.

B.B.P.H.: I would say translation is helping the world understand who you are and where you are coming from. Generally, what do you want the world to know about Korea?

A.H.: I don't share this utilitarian view of translation, although I understand it's the prevalent view. I don't see what I do as a fancy world fair pavilion, as much as I love world fairs and pavilions and generally being fancy. At the end of the day, translation is a very intimate act for me, the closest reading of a text I can imagine doing. I'm not thinking of Korea at all.