"Juan Rulfo in Northeastern Thailand: Translation and Solidarity"

Ensayo Premio Pensar a Contracorriente 2016

Winner of the "Thinking Against the Mainstream" Prize

Organized by Cuba's Ministry of Culture

The contest's announcement:

Cuban Ministry of Culture, Cuban Book Institute and Humankind Defense Network, along with Nuevo Milenio Publishing House ANNOUNCE the 13th edition of "Thinking against the Mainstream" Prize, and 4th of the Special Prize "Endangered Species". The announcement's main goals are to recognize and to promote critic thinking on the most crucial difficulties and challenges to contemporary world from a wide anticolonial and antimperialistic perspective; and to contribute to articulate a legal, economic, and political emancipating theory engaged to crucial issues on environment; as well as engagement against capitalistic hegemonic model devastating effects on material and spiritual life.

Heartening thinking against core countries hegemonic reproduction of social and intellectual domination aimed at silencing-marginalizing emancipating thinking as alternative answer to vast challenges faced by environmental devastation imposed on humankind, "Thinking against the Mainstream" and "Endangered Species" kindles analysis and active proposals in Social Sciences, Culture, and Science and Technology. The contest encourages multiple points of views and diverse approaches confronting hegemonic thought systems in the new geopolitical international arena

[Con el propósito de reconocer y difundir el ***pensamiento crítico*** sobre los problemas y desafíos más acuciantes del mundo contemporáneo, desde perspectivas de amplio sentido anticolonial y antimperialista que contribuya a articular una teoría política, económica y jurídica emancipadora, comprometido con los asuntos cruciales del Medio Ambiente y contra los efectos devastadores del modelo capitalista hegemónico en el orden material y espiritual el Ministerio de Cultura de Cuba, el Instituto Cubano del Libro y la Editorial Nuevo Milenio **convocan a la XIII edición del Premio *Pensar a Contracorriente*.**

Como alternativa al silenciamiento y la marginación que sufre el pensamiento emancipador en los grandes circuitos de reproducción hegemónica y dominación social e intelectual, y ante los inmensos desafíos que la humanidad debe enfrentar por la erosión despiadada de su entorno, el Premio *Pensar a Contracorriente* y el Premio Especial *Una especie en Peligro* aspiran a contribuir al desarrollo de ideas, análisis y propuestas activas dentro del campo de las Ciencias Sociales, la Cultura y el universo Científico-Técnico. En ese contexto, convoca a la diversidad de enfoques y puntos de vista, así como a la confrontación con las bases de los sistemas hegemónicos de pensamiento dentro de la nueva geopolítica internacional.]

Juan Rulfo in Northeastern Thailand: Translation and Solidarity

What is Mexico to a Thai person? Recent Hollywood movies like *Sicario* (2015, dir. Ridley Scott) and documentaries like *Cartel Land* (2015, dir. Matthew Heineman) present Mexico as a dangerous country ruled by murderous anarchy. We consume the image of violent Mexico ravaged by the Drug War, and as a result even the idea of travelling to anywhere in Mexico is met by concern. Why would you want to go there?

What is Thailand to a Mexican person? The massive hit comedy drama *Nosotros los Nobles* (2013, dir. Gary Alazraki) contains a reference to Thailand in a scene where the high-society young woman walks through an open-air fresh food market in Mexico City. Complaining, she exclaimed: "¡Esto parece Tailandia!" While not a representative take on Mexicans' imagination of Thailand, the scene inevitably reproduces that image: Thailand as a dirty, crowded market smelling of raw fish.

I could also ask more generally: to a "Third World" native, what is another "Third World" country? Just another case of underdevelopment, I fear the common response would be.

This response has far-reaching effects. When a man-made disaster happens somewhere in the "Third World," too common we are indifferent. Why should "we" Thai people help "those" Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar? Why should non-black Dominicans care about Haitian-Dominicans being deported from "their" country? What can we all do, anyway, to counter the U.S. drones that spy on and kill civilians in the Middle East and Africa, when we have enough problems to deal with at home?

Worse, this division of the world is not limited to the realm of economic prosperity or political stability. It also creeps into the realm of the imagination.

We tend to think human creativity is at its peak in industrialized countries, in white people, in the North Atlantic. The most internationally recognized and advanced kinds of music, cinema, art, literature, philosophy, digital technology, all seem to emanate from there. But just how much of that perception is due to the fact that our eyes and ears are set on the world's leading countries? What would it entail if we, among the so-called "Third World," turned our eyes towards one another?

In times like this, it is urgent to think of a "we" capable of crossing borders and opening up worlds. Instead of our well-being at the expense of "their" survival, there needs to be a "we" where our fate is linked to one another. Without an expanded notion of solidarity, all we are left with would either be suffocating parochialism (our eyes turned to the National Heroes, jealously protecting their sacredness) or empty universalism (our eyes turned to the West, our lives swept along the currents of globalization).

Solidaridad, according to the Royal Spanish Academy's Dictionary of the Spanish Language, means *adhesion circunstancial a la causa o a la empresa de otros*, "the circumstancial support of the cause or the enterprise of others." Simply put, solidarity means a commitment to others. But what if we rethink solidarity to be a concept that includes both self and other, "us" and "them"?

To this big question, I offer a microscopic response. In the pages that follow, I will walk you through my encounter and engagement with Juan Rulfo in Mexico, along the way elaborating a theory of solidarity and translation. Feeling for a way to connect, carving a space between separate parts of the world, I will chart out what we, cultural translators, can do to piece the world back together.

II. MAKING CONNECTIONS, TRANSLATING RULFO

It started out as a desire to carry home something foreign yet strangely familiar.

I discovered Juan Rulfo in Zapatista autonomous territory at Oventic, Chiapas, México, in 2014. On the second floor of one of their secondary school buildings, a room housed a selection of books and DVDs. An old copy of *El Llano en llamas* sat alongside an anthology of Latin American poetry (where I discovered Roque Dalton and Otto Rene Castillo) and Zapatista-inspired books like *Change the World without Taking Power* and *Crack Capitalism* by John Holloway. The bookshelf faced a brightly painted mural of a face whose enigmatic eyes were absorbed in reading the book open before her. Flowing on both sides of her face were strands of blue rivers, with white outlines of ships, fishes, and snails. This was one of the scenes that accompanied my readings on foggy afternoons.

Not that I hadn't seen Rulfo's name before. Every bookstore in Mexico I frequented always had a copy of *El Llano en llamas*, and the book was recommended by my professor of Spanish as well as a Thai friend of mine who was studying in Mexico City. My professor described the book as, simply, "short stories about

poverty, corruption, and post-revolution Mexico." Prior to coming to Mexico at the start of 2014, I had tried to read a few stories, but then gave up because of my poor Spanish comprehension, not to mention Mexicanisms that I couldn't understand.

One of my teachers at Oventic, when I asked him about *El Llano en llamas*, told me of the importance of Rulfo's work in turning Latin American realities into innovative literature, and urged me to read on. With difficulty, I read the stories arising out of the frustrations after the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion in Jalisco, the chronology of which I had only begun to grasp. Since I had less command over Spanish then, my experience of reading Rulfo was also part of a process of acquiring a new language, of incorporating a new mode of being to myself.

Yet this newness called me to something old.

In a way, Rulfo led me back home.

I grew up in a small province in northeastern Thailand, also known as Isaan. The Northeast accounts for a third of Thailand's population of 70 million people, yet the aspirations of Isaan people for socioeconomic well-being, political representation, and cultural autonomy have long been suppressed. Rulfo led me back to Lao Kham-hom, a pioneer in Isaan literature. As Lao Kham-hom remarked about his now-immortal collection of stories *Fa bo kan [El cielo no separa]* in his prologue for the Swedish edition in 1958:

> Si haya un propósito para categorizarlo en algun tipo literario, este pequeño libro será sólo una 'literatura de temporada', la temporada de carencia y rabia, que es una temporada muy larga en Tailandia. [My translation]

You could replace "Tailandia" with "México" and the essence of it wouldn't change. Both authors were active producers during onset of the Cold War, where the United States extended its imperial powers to numerous places in the world, including Thailand and Mexico.

Both states themselves were not kind to their own citizens, either. Both perpetrated massacres of their own university students: the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 Mexico City, and the massacre of students protesting against military dictatorship in 1976 Bangkok. No need to talk about the lower classes in marginalized places.

I found the book *El Llano en llamas* to be a kindred spirit to classic Northeastern Thai literature. In the imagination of the Thai elite in Bangkok, the Northeast or

Isaan is an expanse of scarcity, with cracked, caked earth everywhere, approximating the meaning of *páramo:* an arid plain left to the cruelties of nature. Arid like the setting of Lao Kham-hom's story *Khiat khaa kham [La rana de pata dorada]*. The story, in English translation, opens:

> The sun blazed as if determined to burn every living thing in the broad fields to a crisp. Now and again the tall, straight, isolated sabang and shorea trees let go of some of their dirty yellow leaves. He sat exhausted against a tree trunk, his dark blue shirt wet with sweat. The expanse around him expressed total dryness. He stared at the tufts of dull grass and bits of straw spinning in a column to the sky. The whirlwind sucked brown earth up into the air casting a dark pall over everything. He recalled the old people had told him this was the portent of drought, want, disaster, and death, and he was afraid.[1]

Feels like Rulfo's ashy mountaintop village of *Luvina*? The Bangkok elite, upon reading stories in *Fa bo kan*, ascribed Northeasterners' vulnerability to drought and death to geography and metereology, or, worse, to the people's ignorance and fatalism.[2] Yet, a closer attention to the story reveals that an important source of suffering is the government's neglect and oppression: the ones who are supposed to protect citizens do the most harm. In the same story, it happens that the man's son is chasing a gold-legged frog—a rare treat—but then gets bitten by a cobra. As the father is trying to save his son's life with all the resources he has, a government order comes for family heads to go get cash assistance.

> "Can't you see my boy's gasping out his life? How can I *go?"* he cried resentfully.
>
> "What difference will it make? You've called in a lot of doctors, all of them expert."
>
> "Go, you fool. It's two hundred baht they're giving. You've never had that much in your whole life. Two hundred!"
>
> "Pardon my saying it," another added, "but if something should happen and the boy dies, you'd be out, that's all."

---

[1] Khamsing Srinawk. *The Politician and Other Stories*, translated by Domnern Garden and Herbert P. Phillips. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. 2001. p. 28.

[2] Chusak Pattarakulvanit. "Fa bo kan yang wa hai hang kan." *Aan [Read Journal]* 1(3). Bangkok: Aan.

> "I won't go," he yelled. "My kid can't breathe and you tell me to go. Why can't they hand it out some other day? It's true I've never had two hundred baht since I was born, but I'm not going. I am not going."
>
> "Jail," another interjected. "If you don't go, you simply go to jail. Whoever disobeyed the authorities? If they decide to give, you have to take. If not, jail."[3]

Government redistribution and welfare, far from making citizens and government closer and more equal, is presented as an act of benevolence one cannot disobey. The command to "take" whatever the government has deigned to give you echoes *Nos han dado la tierra,* where the men are supposed to be grateful that the post-revolution Mexican government has given them so much barren land without a drop of rain. The story continues:

> The word "jail" repeated like that unnerved him, but still he resisted.
>
> "Whatever it is, I said I'm not going. I don't want it. How can I leave the kid when he's dying?" He raised his voice. "No, I won't go."
>
> "You go. Don't go against the government. We're *ratsadon ['citizens']*." He turned to find the village chief standing grimly at his side.
>
> "If I don't go, will it really be jail?" he asked in a voice suddenly become hoarse.
>
> "For sure," the village chief replied sternly. "Maybe for life."
>
> That did it. In a daze, he asked the faith healers and neighbors to take care of his son and left the house.[4]

The use of the word *ratsadon ["citizens"]* to really mean subjects echoes *El hombre,* where the shepherd fearfully defers to the government official, when in fact the shepherd has done nothing wrong. The official is respectfully referred to as *"el señor licenciado"* while the shepherd has to profess ignorance to avoid being thrown in jail: *"soy borreguero y no sé de otras cosas."*[5] This shows that the so-called "ignorance" of the marginalized is actually produced by the government's rule. A rule that lays claim on your life—a life sentence—even when it pretends to be benevolent. What fatalism!

---

[3] Khamsing Srinawk (Ibid.), p. 30.
[4] Ibid, pp. 30-31.
[5] Juan Rulfo. *Toda la obra.* Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1996. p. 40.

In other words, both Juan Rulfo and Lao Kham-hom make it viscerally clear how the state is indifferent to the people, at best, and how it doesn't allow the people to possess their own lives, at worst.

To see oneself in the other and the other in oneself—to recognize that we have something in common worthy enough of communication—was my first step toward becoming a translator.

Why didn't I get to read Rulfo's stories before, even in translation?

Certainly, I wasn't the first person from Thailand to have come into contact with Juan Rulfo. As it turns out *Pedro Páramo* has already been translated into Thai, twice, the first time in 1980, the second time in 2000. But I also found out that, in both translations, it was translated from the English translation, and secondly, that Rulfo was presented as a precursor to Magical Realism, a marketing strategy that flattened the specificities of Mexico. Thai readers have been introduced to him through previous mediation, whether by way of an English translation, or by way of its inclusion in the "Magical Realism" category popularized by U.S. book markets.

What I yearned for was a direct contact that would place Rulfo alongside Northeastern Thai literature. Why? Because Rulfo's stories achieve universality without eliminating their class specificities and Mexican-ness. Because Rulfo, more than anyone I have read, retrieves marginalized people's orality and crystallizes it into literary form, into something of unsurpassed permanence. In these ways, Rulfo could enrich the works of contemporary writers and artists in my home region, those of us who have been trying to express our voices in ways independent from the national center, with our distinct history, language, and future.

To that end, I have attempted to translate one of the stories, *Paso del Norte,* directly into Lao, the dominant language of everyday life in Isaan, yet excluded from the national educational curriculum. Since as a people we grow up learning only Thai script, my translation uses the Thai script. Still, my translation breaks away from standard and official ways of writing Thai, with alternative spellings and a tendency to use Lao instead of Thai words.

The short story *Paso del Norte* is presented in the form of a dialogue between a man and his father. It sets its scene in the world of poor Mexicans' migration across the Río Bravo into the United States of America some time after World War II. The son wants to cross the border into the United States to find work and accumulate money, as there is no work in Mexico. The father urges his son to stay and reprimands him for not being hardworking enough. The two air grievances about

each other's neglect. After some talk, the father agrees to take care of the son's family while he is away. The dialogue picks up again when the son returns, empty-handed, to tell his father about his tragic ordeal while trying to cross the river.

In translating this story, I am inspired by the theory of translation put forward by literary theorist George Steiner in *After Babel*. His account of the "hermeneutic motion" presents translation as an act of interpretation. Key to his theory is its ethics: the interpreter who takes from the foreign should give something in return.

The "hermeneutic motion" starts with the translator's *trust* and surrender to the powers of the original, then goes through a phase of penetrative *aggression* where the translator invades into foreign territory to extract meaning, then returns to the stage of *incorporation* when the receiving language and culture adopts or rejects aspects of the foreign, and eventually the act of translation finds balance in *restitution*.

Of the fourfold stages in the act of translation, the intermediate two phases—aggression and incorporation—involves violence in the struggle between the domestic and the foreign, the push and pull of appropriation and rejection. However, the final balance means that the target language and culture finds an equilibrium with the origin. This final stage offers a way to think of translation as an *ethical* act: that the translator has a duty to restore balance to the plunder they have committed to the original:

> The translator, the exegetist, the reader is *faithful* to his text, makes his response responsible, only when he endeavours to restore the balance of forces, of integral presence, which his appropriative comprehension has disrupted.[6]

Then, Steiner draws from structural anthropology to elaborate further how "fidelity is ethical, but also, in the full sense, economic":

> There is, ideally, exchange without loss. . . . The general model here is that of Lévi-Strauss's *Anthropologie structurale* which regards social structures as attempts at dynamic equilibrium achieved through an exchange of words, women, and material goods. All capture calls for subsequent compensation; utterance solicits response, exogamy and endogamy are mechanisms of

[6] George Steiner. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975. p. 318.

> equalizing transfer. . . A translation is, more than figuratively, an act of double-entry; both formally and morally the books must balance.[7]

Ideal translation, that is to say, would eventually eliminate the power imbalances between the domestic "us" and the foreign "them." While the entities of "us" and "them" remain sovereign, both stand on equal footing in their mutual contact and communication.

Let me give a concrete example of what restitution looks like. My translation of *Paso del Norte* attempts to do justice to both the original Spanish and the translated Lao. My appropriation of the text, by claiming that it could belong to Northeastern Thai literature, inevitably shapes the reception of the original, a distortion of sorts. But wouldn't translating Rulfo into the Thai language as taught in school textbooks be a betrayal?

Being faithful, for George Steiner, is not about the accuracy of word-for-word or sense-for-sense rendering; faithfulness happens only when the reader/translator "makes his response responsible." That responsibility lies in whether the translation "makes the autonomous virtues of the original more precisely visible" and whether it "infers that the source-text possesses potentialities, elemental reserves as yet unrealized by itself."[8]

I attempt to be faithful in two ways. First, I added an explanatory footnote on the history of the migration between border towns Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and El Paso, Texas, especially in the postwar Bracero Program, in order to remind the Thai reader that this story took root in and brought its energies from somewhere specific, however relevant it could be to our domestic concerns. Upon reading a draft of translation, my first reader, also a Lao speaker from my hometown, remarked that the tragic ending reminded him of the tragic fates of many men from Northeastern Thailand who sold their farmlands to pay for their trips for prosperity in Saudi Arabia, only to come back empty-handed and realize that their wives had left. The fact that a Mexican story could remind us of our own countrymen is important. But if I end there, my translation would stop at the stage of incorporation, rather than restitution. The footnote, therefore, restores the balance without limiting the possibilities of reading: a footnote does not render the Isaan men in Saudi Arabia reference illegitimate. This is an exchange without loss.

---

[7] Ibid., pp. 318-319.
[8] Ibid., p. 318.

Second, I render the source text in a regional vernacular. By doing so, I am hoping to realize the oral potentialities of the source-text, itself riven with examples of nonstandard spellings (*naide* for *nadie*, *ónde* for *dónde*, *güevo* for *huevo*) and sayings difficult to interpret and render (like *"Andar por los caminos enseña mucho. Restriégate con tu propio estropajo, eso es lo que has de hacer"*[9]). I believe that I can only do justice to the powers of the original text by putting it in a vernacular, rather than the standard dialect of the Thai language accessible for all Thai readers.

Furthermore, the work of restitution also happened in myself as a translator. The process of translating the story was also a story of finding my own community and "discovering" my own language.

At the time when I finished my studies and returned to Thailand, I had lived abroad for five years. Since moving away from Thailand, however, I became more interested in learning about my home region. I read Isaan literary classics. I became more fluent in vernacular Lao, previously something I could only listen to but never spoke it myself. That's why translating *Paso del Norte* into my "native tongue" was difficult, precisely because it was unclear what my "native tongue" was.

It took several drafts and several people for the translation to be completed, and in that process I came closer to finding my voice. I chose to work closely with a few friends who are more fluent in vernacular Lao than I am, and we in turn enriched our vernacular by bringing it into literary form. I came away from the experience of translation enriched in my own soil, at the same time as Rulfo's work is disseminated faithfully, taking root on the other side of the world.

This way, I can make new linkages, and shake myself free from reliance on Bangkok standards of literary judgment. I can circumvent hegemonic channels of production and consumption, bringing southwestern Mexico and northeastern Thailand into direct contact.

Translating Juan Rulfo's stories has made me become more in tune with the possibilities to connect "us" and "them." George Steiner's specific theory of literary translation, I propose, can be usefully brought to bear on the question of solidarity. What does restitution look like outside books?

III. BUILDING SOLIDARITY, DISSEMINATING OVENTIC

[9] Juan Rulfo (Ibid.), p. 123.

During my weeks in Chiapas, one of the videos I remember the most vividly told a story of Oventic, which now houses the Language School I attended. *Oventic Construyendo Dignidad,* the video's title, documented indigenous people's efforts to build Oventic in 1995, brick by brick, with their hoes breaking rocks and their fists raised against the patrolling military. The most striking sequence of the video showed dozens of tanks passing through the site of Oventic on a newly built road. Women and men of all ages linked hands and shouted *"¡fuera el pinche ejército!"* at the passing trucks, armed with artillery and video cameras. Remarkably, on-screen text listed the properties of each tank, and told us where the parts and technology came from.

TORRETA LYNX 90
FABRICANTE: HISPANO-SUIZA (FRANCIA)
CON AMETRALLADORA COAXIAL CALIBRE 7.62

MAC-1 CARRO BLINDADO CHRYSLER (E.U.A)
TORRETA ARMADA CON CAÑON – 20 MILIMETROS
CONFIGURACION 4X4 TRIPULACION – 4
PRODUCCION COMPLETA SERVICIO UNICO A MEXICO

Spanish-Swiss, France, The United States of America, Mexico. These on-screen texts expose how the threat of violence by the Mexican military is only possible through international collaboration of military technology.

These tanks testify to the fact that authoritarianism works internationally—and not only for the production of tanks and weapons, but also for the dissemination of torture methods, for example those used by the C.I.A all over the globe.[10] The construction of the highway passing through the heart of Oventic, well echoes the caution about today's world summarized by intellectual historian David A. Hollinger: "If you do not take on as much of the world as you can, the world will come to you, and on terms over which you will have even less control than you did previously."[11]

---

[10] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program.* United States Senate, 2014. http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/study2014/sscistudy1.pdf

[11] David A. Hollinger. *Cospmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious and Professional Affiliation in the United States.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. p. xxii.

The Zapatistas responded by internationalizing solidarity *desde abajo y a la izquierda*, from the bottom and to the left.

They recognized that their survival and dignity as indigenous peoples could only be sustained if they build a larger "we." From their "Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism" in 1996 to their "The Other Campaign" oppositional to the Mexican presidential election campaign in 2005, the Zapatistas reached out to the world. At the same time, they continued building Oventic. Now, it is a seat of a *caracol*, a coordinating hub of the Zapatistas' Good Government. It has clinics with equipments donated by international organizations; it has women workers' cooperatives, and a running secondary school as well as a Tzotzil and Spanish language school for outside visitors.

Threats are still there, though, with occasional helicopters flying over autonomous territory, paramilitary groups destabilizing communities, big companies looking to tap into water and wildlife of the mountains, and the government buying up land adjacent to places like Oventic.

As part of a group of students in the *Red de solidaridad con México* (Mexico Solidarity Network program), I contributed my small part to the world-building project of Oventic by painting a mural. I designed the mural as a map of Oventic in the form of "a snail where many snails fit." Deriving its meaning from the Mayan past where conch shells were used as the instrument for summoning a community gathering[12], the *caracol* has become the symbolic term for coordinating hubs of autonomous good governance. Oventic is one of the five *caracoles.* As Subcomandante Marcos puts it in the first part of *La treceava estela [The Thirteenth Stele]*:

> Dicen aquí que los más antiguos dicen que otros más anteriores dijeron que los más primeros de estas tierras tenían aprecio por la figura del caracol. Dicen que dicen que decían que el caracol representa el entrarse al corazón, que así le decían los más primeros al conocimiento. Y dicen que dicen que decían que el caracol también representa el salir del corazón para andar el mundo, que así llamaron los primeros a la vida. Y no sólo, dicen que dicen que decían que con el caracol se llamaba al colectivo para que la palabra fuera de uno a otro y naciera el acuerdo.

[12] Thomas M. Urban, "Caracol de la Resistencia: Zapatista Symbol References Maya Past." *Archeolog.* Posted on August 21, 2007. http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/archaeolog/2007/08/caracol_de_la_resistencia_zapa_1.html

Y también dicen que dicen que decían que el caracol era ayuda para que el oído escuchara incluso la palabra más lejana.

So that the ear could hear even the most distant word… Even if that word comes from the other side of the world. Furthermore, this passage suggests that solidarity not only encompasses great geographical distance, but also temporal distance. Recognizing the *caracol*'s significance is possible through chains of storytellers from generations past, all the way back to the primordial ancestors of humanity. Solidarity extends in space and time. The past breathes life into the present.

The *caracol,* as snail, also suggests the slow rhythm of the work of building solidarity. *Poco a poco.* My design was inspired by a song about Oventic which starts with "No longer can I live outside Oventic, because one thing I really like to do is build"…

Ya no puedo vivir fuera de Oventik
Porque lo que a mí me gusta es construir

Y si el mal gobierno nos quiere destruir
Haremos en todas partes más Oventik
No me voy fuera de aquí
Siempre listo a combatir…

Ya no puedo vivir fuera de Oventik
Porque lo que a mí me gusta es construir

Y si el mal gobierno nos quiere destruir
Haremos en todas partes más Oventik
Oventik, más Oventik
Siempre muchos Oventik…

Oventik, más Oventik
Siempre muchos Oventik…

"Un caracol donde quepan muchos caracoles" (myself on the bottom right)

Of course, there came a time when I had to leave Oventic. But the phrase "we will create more Oventics everywhere" was key. It meant that even if I left Oventic, I could still create more Oventics in my life. It meant that I could carry it home. A world where many worlds fit; an Oventic where many Oventics disseminate.

In our farewell party, I told my Zapatista teachers *"les voy a traer conmigo."* That commitment to carry them along has guided me as a translator. To do the work of restitution: restoring balance between "us" and "them" after so much of my learning and taking from them. To do the work of building international solidarity.

But we cannot go so far as to dissolve the categories of "us" and "them" altogether and embrace one mass called "humanity." Even when we proclaim to be in solidarity with all people and beings on this planet, we are intimate with not many peoples and places. There are priorities to be set.

Rather than proclaim empty universal solidarity, we need to build it through particular connections. We need to work for it. Where there is a lack of representation and knowledge, we as cultural translators need to go find it. Before "us" and "them" can stand on equal footing, we need to become intimate with them:

know their languages, sympathize with their struggles, link our history and future with theirs. We need to restore balance. Something that approximates George Steiner's notion of restitution in the act of translation—where "us" and "them" find equilibrium in difference-in-equality and equality-in-difference.

To illustrate my point, I would like to speak of my translation of Rulfo once more. My decision to render *Paso del Norte* a regional dialect runs the risk of excluding the majority of Thai readers, some of whom may be very enthusiastic to read him. Wouldn't it prove to be unnecessarily difficult for them, due to their unfamiliarity with regional dialect, which is surely none of their fault?

I wouldn't disagree with the claim that I exclude many people from the "we" of Rulfo readers. Let's put this in perspective, however. Standard Thai, even though virtually all Thai people understand it, is not felt to be the same thing by different Thai speakers.

The majority of people from Isaan, from past to present, learned standard Thai as a second language, in fact.[13] A second language that is a vehicle for class mobility and cultural refinement. Access to much of national literature depends much on our incorporation of the standard lingo. But why do we need to look down on the potentials of our own language and culture to strive for something more cosmopolitan and universal? While much of Isaan literature is in standard Thai, *luk thung* folk music, which blends traditional Lao and Western instruments as well as Lao and Thai words in the lyrics, has been the channel through which northeastern Thai people find expression and joy without having to code-switch their identity. I strive for something analogous in written works.

I would rather risk being difficult to Thais unfamiliar with Lao, set my own terms of engagement, and allow those patient and willing enough to become part of the "we." After all, I use *their* script to render Lao.

A Spanish person born and raised in Madrid, I imagine, would have a similarly difficult time reading Juan Rulfo's *El Llano en llamas,* full of words like *tatemar, chacamotear, ocote,* and the obsolete-in-Spain-but-super-colloquial-in-Mexico *nomás*? But if they have enough trust in the value of something "strangely familiar" in their language but not quite their *own.* I believe if they are a patient, willing Spanish reader, they could still fully appreciate Rulfo in their own ways.

---

[13] Karl Victor, "Thai Has the Highest Percentage of Second-Language Speakers among Major Languages." *The Isaan Record.* Reported on 2 September 2015.

Despite all differences, it is imperative to insist that our fates are linked. Only when we begin to think this way can we see new doors open up before our eyes. Only when we cultivate cross-cultural commitments can our ears, like a *caracol*, hear even the most distant word, so that across space and time an agreement to build more Oventics can be built.

Late in 2015, another Oventic was built between Thailand and Mexico. A coalition of former study abroad students organized for a two-week trip for four delegates from those fighting the military-backed gold mining industry in Loei, Northeastern Thailand to meet anti-mining activists in Oaxaca, Mexico. Online news site devoted to northeastern Thai topics *The Isaan Record* reports, in an excerpt:

> The two Na Nong Bong villagers traveling to Mexico – Phrattrapron Kaenjumpa, 35, and Surapan Rujichaiyavat, 44, were selected by fellow community members to represent the village in the delegation. Both were among those activist leaders hog-tied and beaten [when 300 masked men attacked their village in 2013]. Feeling unsafe ever since, the villagers are eager to learn new strategies to defend themselves against the mining company, Tungkum Ltd., and its allies.
>
> "We need to learn how we can protect ourselves," says Mr. Surapan, hopeful that he can learn from the experiences of Mexican anti-mining activists. "There might be times in the future when we will have to face similar situations [as the communities in Mexico]."
>
> The Na Nong Bong villagers' fear for safety resonates in San Jose del Progreso, a small town south of Oaxaca City. In March 2012, Bernardo Vazquez, a local activist, was assassinated after actively opposing a Canadian silver and gold mining project in his community.[14]

Now the Isaan activists have been back in Thailand for some time, fighting the same fight, yet with ever increasing solidarity in organizing methods and philosophies with Mexico. I had an opportunity to listen to Mr. Surapan—affectionately called *Po mai [Papá Mai]*—talk about his experience in Mexico. *Po mai* told us that in Mexico the situation was much more hostile to the community, yet community organizations were much stronger. There was much work to do in Thailand, he

[14] Rebecca Goncharoff. "Isaan Villagers and Students travel to Mine-Affected Communities in Mexico." *The Isaan Record,* reported on 29 October 2015. http://isaanrecord.com/2015/10/29/isaan-villagers-and-students-travel-to-mine-affected-communities-in-mexico/

concluded. (Incidentally, the *oaxaqueños* activists were attendees of the *escuelita zapatista*. I'm sure they would agree that there was much work to do.)

This month, anti-mining activists in Loei, in collaboration with Amnesty Thailand, are inviting human rights defenders from all over the country to participate in an educational trip to communities affected by gold mining, an event that coincides with merit-making ceremonies to build a cast-iron Buddha statue on the mined mountains. There, sacred rituals and human rights discourses will come together, sparking a solidarity that reaches back into Lao-speaking communities' tradition, reaches forward into the future of their spiritual well-being, and reaches around to bring in outsiders who are willing to spend time learning from them. Is this not an Oventic?

IV. PROLIFERATING LIBRARIES, REPLICATING CONACULTA

After my stay in Chiapas, I had an opportunity to learn from various social movements and workers' cooperatives in the state of Tlaxcala, a few hours' drive away from the capital. For a few weeks I stayed in Hueyotlipan, a small city whose sign says the population is 10,000. A walk around the city would give one an impression of a quiet provincial town, full of mothers keeping the house or tending to local stores, children in school uniform walking home, and adolescent couples fondling in semi-public. Adult men are for the most part absent, however. More than half of them have crossed *para el otro lado* to work in various places such as Jacksonville, Tennessee, and Airy, Pennsylvania. Today's reincarnation of Rulfo's *Paso del Norte*, perhaps.

One wouldn't expect that in a town like this, there would be a place with spaces for art exhibitions and performances, conference rooms, books and computers. Yet, there is a cultural center just like that. *El Centro Cultural Hueyotlipan* was built by the *Instituto Tlaxcaltelca de Cultura* in 1989, and was recently renovated. Among the new things were a playground and a new library.

While the library was small, having only one room lined with shelves on three sides and some tables and chairs in the middle, the library had an extensive collection of brand-new books under the categories of Mexican Literature and World Literature. You could borrow any book for one week, renewable. During the short three weeks I stayed at Hueyotlipan, I finished *Pedro Páramo*, read several pages from the essay *El laberinto de la soledad* by Octavio Paz, and flipped through the

thick volume of *Las mil y una noches [Arabian nights]* abundantly illustrated in color. What a library!

I was so impressed because, in Thailand, good libraries are hard to find in my home city. You could find a good one here and there in big cities, but even in those ones, you cannot expect to find a good, wide-ranging collection of world literature.

To bookstores I owe much of my intellectual flourishing. In my teenage years, bookstores were my favorite spots to hang out. It was like meeting friends who convinced me it was okay to think critically about the world, to go against the mainstream, to find community in people I had not actually met. There, I discovered new authors, new genres, new languages, new feelings, and ultimately new ways to lead a life. After ten years of learning English in school, I finally became fluent in the language from laboring through books like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* for months on end, a painful yet enchanting process. Knowing another language opened many possibilities for my life, including winning a scholarship to study in the United States for five years, during which time I spent a semester in Mexico.

After my studies abroad ended, I decided to translate *El Llano en llamas.* I went to the bookstore in Bangkok that had satiated much of my literary thirst during my teenage years. Kinokuniya, the bookstore, had a wide range of books in Thai, English, Japanese, and Chinese. My favorite shelves to frequent were the "Literature" and "Thai literature." You could find almost anything you want: from classics like several editions of Anton Chekov's stories (in English), to contemporary hits like Junot Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her,* both in paperback and elegantly bound hardcover editions.

Almost, but not everything: there was only one book of Juan Rulfo—a thin copy of *Pedro Páramo,* in English translation, and at an exorbitant price of 500 baht (about 14 U.S. dollars)—almost two days' worth of Thai minimum wage! There was no copy of *El Llano en llamas* in the book market, much less its out-of-print English translation *The Burning Plain and Other Stories.*

Returning to Kinokuniya this time really made me realize something crucial: that as a consumer, even a literary consumer in the best of bookstores, I did not have the power to choose. It was not only state ideology, I realized, that constrained my intellectual development by censoring some thinkers while awarding others, or by requiring students to read pre-selected things and follow conventional interpretations. The "free market" of Kinokuniya also had its constraints. The hegemony of U.S. book markets in dictating what books become "classics" and

"bestsellers," the calculus of pricing and profits, and the status of the English language, all constrained what was available to me.

Beyond access, however, what is at stake here is the possibility of wanting to have that access in the first place.

I realized that I didn't even have the power to really know what I wanted. My desire to read something arose out of a browse through the bookstores. My ways of browsing, in turn, arose out of earlier readings, which were also shaped by this "free market." I didn't know anyone who shared my thirst for hardcore literature. I could have known Juan Rulfo, perhaps, through a reference by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, whose books are widely available both in English and Thai. But even then it would not have made me patient enough to get to know Rulfo.

To my delay in "discovering" Rulfo, one could perhaps offer a market solution. Diversifying distributors of books to make the market more relevant and responsive to consumers' desires, especially marginalized ones like myself. Indeed, some recent book events in Thailand have come up with innovative market solutions, like publishing quality translated books in small number for a niche market of indie bookstores and online shops for die-hard readers, or crowdsourcing 15,000 U.S. dollars from 700 individual sponsors for translating Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to be released to Thai readers for free online.[15] But this market solution does not satisfy me, because it doesn't take into account the fact that the "free market" is itself the agent that creates and directs desires, rather than enables people to self-recognize and cultivate them. Anyone acquainted with the world of literature probably has heard of how important and brilliant *Moby Dick* is, but not of *El Llano en llamas.*

Or, perhaps, one could offer a "21th century solution": digitalize world literature. Of course, I could just type "Juan Rulfo texto" on the Google search engine, and would be able to find all his stories. But how in the world would I care to look for "Juan Rulfo" in the first place? I would need some reason to care in the vast ocean of content on the Internet. I would need someone to recommend it to me, some blog post that links up different works in an enchanting constellation, some translator who would carry it into a language I could understand. In other words, I would still need to rely on particular humans laboring to connect, translate, proofread, curate, anthologize, summarize, advertise.

---

[15] Dennis Abrams. "Thai Publisher Crowdfunds a Translation of Moby Dick." *Publishing Perspectives,* posted on 23 February 2015. http://publishingperspectives.com/2015/02/thai-publisher-crowdfunds-a-translation-of-moby-dick/#.VpALjRWLSUk

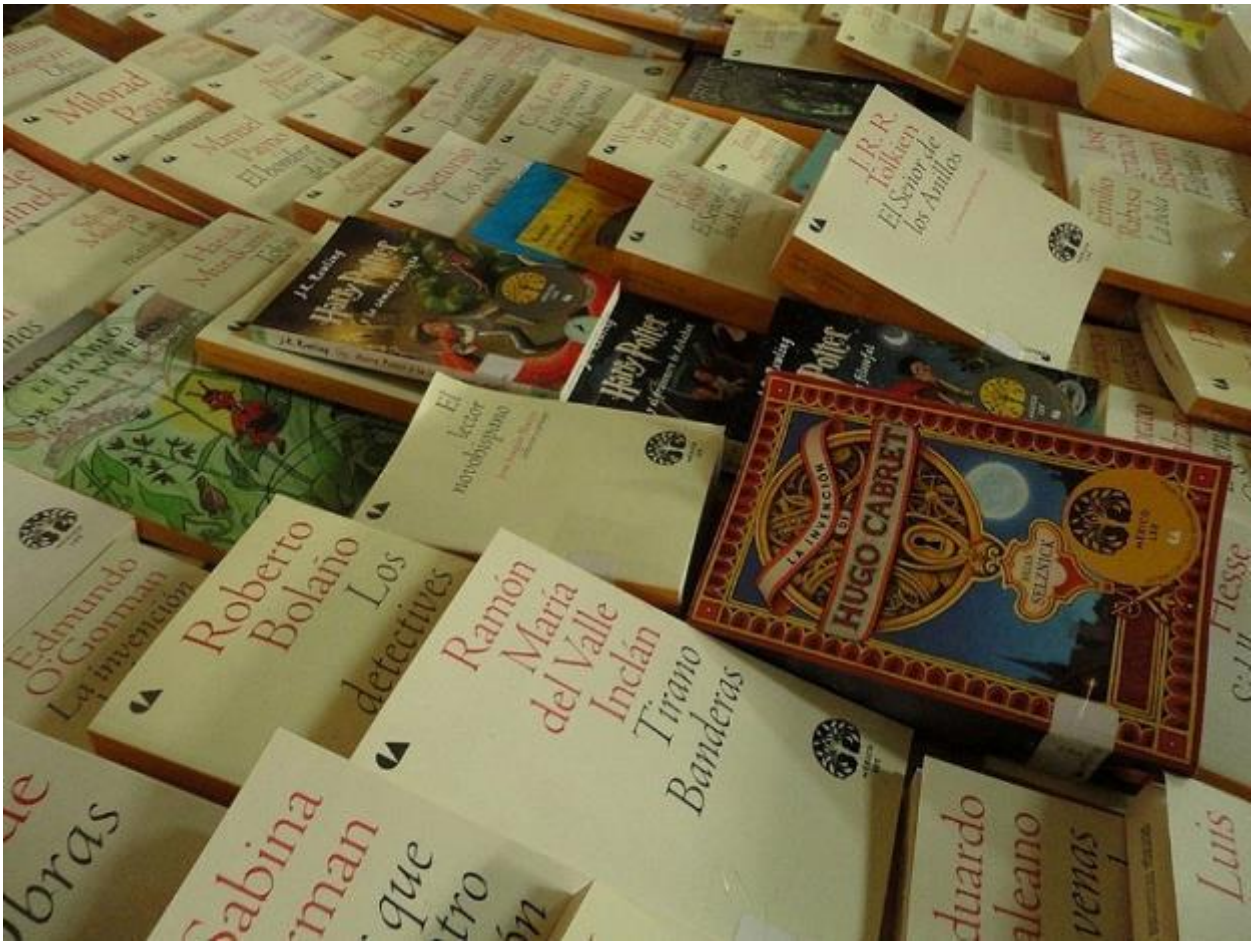
Thailand and every country of the world, I propose, should replicate Mexico's work of disseminating world literature in local libraries. Proliferating libraries like the one at the *Centro Cultural Hueyotlipan* is a viable solution. More welcoming than the best of university libraries, more affordable than the best of bookstores, local libraries with a good selection of books can open worlds.

After thirty years of cultural work in Mexico to build more public libraries, the number jumped from 351 libraries to 7,363 libraries in 2,281 municipalities,[16] doubtless one of them the library of *Centro Cultural Hueyotlipan.*

The new books I found in the library in the Tlaxcalan town were edited, published, and distributed by Mexico's National Council for Culture and the Arts (*El Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes – Conaculta),* under the Ministry of Public Education and Culture. In 2012, through their reading promotion program *México Lee [Mexico Reads],* Conaculta invested 300 million pesos in 2012 (about 20 million U.S. dollars) to publish 2 million books for 3,500 libraries.[17] Apart from classics by Mexican authors, the list includes works for youth like C.S. Lewis's *Las crónicas de Narnia [The Chronicles of Narnia]* as well as world literature translated into Spanish, like Haruki Murakami's *Tokio Blues [Norwegian Wood]*. Such a selection is unimaginable for the Thai Ministry of Culture.

[16] "La Red Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas cumple 30 años" Comunicado No. 1189/2013, 5 de agosto de 2013. *Secretaría de Cultura.* http://www.conaculta.gob.mx/noticias/efemerides/28352-la-red-nacional-de-bibliotecas-publicas-cumple-30-anos.html

[17] **"**Conaculta presenta Programa de Selección de Adquisición de Acervos para las Bibliotecas Públicas "México Lee"" Comunicado No. 1533, 17 de julio de 2012. *Conaculta.* http://www.conaculta.gob.mx/movilprensa_detalle.php?id=21892



Some of the titles distributed by Conaculta to local libraries in Mexico (Photo from news article "Llegan 600 títulos de Literature a la biblioteca" in Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, on 27 February 2013.)

Admittedly, the proposed model of distributing cultural goods may result to have as many constraints as the "free market" model, especially ideological ones. In Cuba, for instance, celebrating the achievements of an Alejo Carpentier would be immensely more doable than airing posthumous grievances for the exile of a Reinaldo Arenas.[18] It would surprise me, indeed, if *México Lee* distributes Marx's *Capital* and Gloria Muñoz Ramírez's *EZLN: 20 y 10, el fuego y la palabra [The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement]* that I found in Oventic.

[18] I did not include this reference in the version submitted to the jury of the contest, as I didn't know whether the author Reinaldo Arenas had been reclaimed in Cuba after such an unjust exile, boycott, and death (see Thomas Colchie's scathing essay chronicling Arenas's travails as a fameless exiled writer in the United States in his "Introduction" to *Singing from the Well*, published by Penguin). Which is to say, I deleted the reference because, frankly, I didn't want to risk it. Here, I add it back to do justice to my original thoughts.

But my point is that programs like this should be "internationalized." Once these programs go beyond national confines there will be more openings for thinking and doing against the conventional. Thinking and doing that puts public money to good use while not succumbing to a particular state's ideology and censorship.

A case in point: Conaculta's *Translation Support Program (Programa de apoyo a la traducción).* Currently in its third year, this program has awarded a few hundred foreign publishers' projects to translate works of Mexican authors into foreign languages, and scores of Mexican publishers' projects to translate foreign works into Spanish. The purpose of this program is, according to its 2015 announcement, "to contribute to the international promotion and dissemination of the Mexican culture and to foster cultural exchange."

My editor and I are applying for the program and hope to receive funding for a translation of *El Llano en llamas* into "Thai." While Juan Rulfo's work is considered a classic of classics in Mexican literature, the committee's decision to award or not to award the fund to us has little bearing on our translation. As promoters of "Mexican culture," they have no final say over what this "Mexican culture" would turn out to mean in foreign lands.

It is us translators who need to restore that meaning of foreign culture in the process of bringing it home.

V. CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR CULTURAL TRANSLATORS

We are being suffocated by capitalist globalization. There is a sore need for new channels of cultural circulation that bring different parts of the world into direct contact, rather than into reductive mediation by major capitalist channels. These new channels, market-driven or otherwise, need to be carved by people willing to act as cultural translators—people who facilitate contact and understanding not only between languages but also between cultures.

We, as cultural translators, need to take advantage of all available opportunities to open up more intercultural spaces, so that people's capacity to think and to imagine can flourish organically and more independent of the arbitrary forces set in motion by capitalism and state power.

We, as cultural translators, need to make "humanity" concrete and grounded. One cannot effectively counter the hierarchy of humanity by declaring that one cares about everyone equally. Whenever and wherever there is a lack of representation

and knowledge, we as cultural translators need to go fill in the gap and make it relevant.

We, as cultural translators, do not speak as representatives from our respective countries or cultures. We speak as individuals from particular places with commitments to various collective struggles, with overlaps and tensions. This way, we can circumvent our governments' claims on us.

But it does not end there. The key to all of this, as George Steiner proposes in his theory of translation, is that what has been taken must be restored. We, as cultural translators, need to build international solidarity by giving back, from the micro-level work of cross-pollinating words, to the macro-level work of crossing worlds. Both economically and morally the countries must balance.

I have learned so much from all my *compas* in Mexico, thanks to tireless efforts of many who have made the study abroad program *Mexico Solidarity Network* possible. It is time I started to give back, from my place, passion, and capacity. Wherever you are from, I hope that you find my efforts to carry Juan Rulfo home, and in that process carry Northeastern Thailand back to myself and out to the world, to be a small contribution to opening up yours.

Acceptance speech, via email:

Estimado comité organizador del concurso PENSAR A CONTRACORRIENTE 2016 y los de la Feria del libro, muchas gracias por su esfuerzo continuo en abrir espacios culturales nuevos para crear un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos. Realmente, hay pocos concursos con títulos e intención tan contrahegemónicos como esto.

No creo que un concurso como este exista en mi país ni los países cercanos en el Sudeste Asiático. Entonces les agradezco a todos que hacen posible el concurso, especialmente la opción de escribir en otros idiomas.

Encontré la convocatoria por accidente mientras buscaba datos sobre la relación diplomática entre Tailandia y Cuba. Muchas gracias a la Internet y los que mantienen los websites. El tema llamativo inmediatamente me llevó a pensar en cómo mis experiencias transnacionales en los Estados Unidos y México pudieran ser relevantes a otros más distantes, como lxs en Cuba. Gracias al concurso, logré dar forma a mi compromiso a unas causas liberadoras y literarias en el ensayo "Juan Rulfo in Northeastern Thailand: Translation and Solidarity."

Les agradezco a mi cómplice de vida Fai Panchompoo Wisittanawat, a mi novio Paul Bierman, y a mi amigo Ko Natnatee Dokmai, por apoyo moral inigualable, y por extender mis ideas para lo más relevantes.

Ahora que llevo este honor a casa, quisiera reiterar como mencioné en mi ensayo que llevo conmigo también mis compas desde las montañas y llanos de México. Este honor se dedica a Efraín, el promotor de educación zapatista que me introdujo a Juan Rulfo.

Mientras me estoy acostando en el hospital, recuperando del cáncer testicular, este premio me apoyará continuar mi trabajo como traductor y escritor. El dinero va a financiar la publicación de *El Llano en llamas* en el habla popular del noreste tailandés que merece acercarse a este libro. Les agradezco a todos los jueces, miembros del comité, hasta participantes pasados y presentes del concurso, porque formamos una frente cultural que se necesita más y más.

Gracias a todxs por inspirarme, y también por inspirarnos del otro lado del mundo a abrir nuevos espacios culturales y nuevas oportunidades de pensar más ampliamente. Gracias por permitirnos inspirar una bocanada de aire fresco.

20 February 2016

Sanprasitthiprasong Hospital, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand