Longhand

Research Notes

Tamwa-anay sa Balkonahe: Romero kag Huli A Queer Bikol-Hiligaynon Tradaptation of Romeo and Juliet

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Abstract

Existing translations of Shakespeare in Bikol draw from the diverse dialects in the region providing a translation that, in interpreting Shakespeare toward the Bikol imaginary, plays with and and changes him, re-homes him in the many islands of the region. Meanwhile, early Hiligaynon translations of Shakespeare, such as Ricaredo Ho's *Ang Komersiante sa Venecia* in 1933 (Ick, 2013, 2015), hint at a preference for a vernacularization of form rather than a localization of the actual texts. By using both languages to translate the famous balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet through a short film, our project hopes to reframe the act of translating Shakespeare as an experiment of archipelagic and queer co-imagination. The short film's performance and interpretation of the famous balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet is a practice in tradaptation (translation and adaptation), and our response to fidelity toward standard language varieties and the heteronormative characterizations found in earlier translations of the play. In line with tradaptations' aim to disrupt language hierarchies and unsettle "borders" in Shakespeare's after-lives, our project "speaks back" not only to Shakespeare but also to local and regional appraisals of Shakespearean text, specifically in two of Philippines' major languages, Hiligaynon and Bikol. The project explores how space and language can serve as both manifestation and affective resolution of socio-political conflict and romance.

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Tamwa-anay sa Balkon: Romero kag Huli (Looking out from the Balcony: Romero and Huli) is short film translation and adaptation of Act 2, Scene 2 of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. This *tradaptation* (Gillen and Santos, 2023) aims to explore alternative manifestations of the conflict between the two houses, particularly through linguistic and gendered frames. In the original scene, Romeo and Juliet navigate their desire vis-a-vis the constraints of their social position. Their families, though alike in dignity, are violently feuding and the accident of their birth prevents them from being together. In our film, Romero and Huli are lovers that speak different languages: Romero speaks Hiligaynon, the vernacular in Iloilo province, and Huli speaks Bicol, the vernacular in Bicol province. They are both women meeting beside a river, away from the walls of society. Our project is motivated by the following provocations: What semantic valences or extensions within the original can a queer translation surface? How would Romeo and Juliet navigate the difference in their language on the one hand, and the "same-ness" of their sex on the other? These two vectors of translation have been paved by countless adaptations of the star-crossed lovers, finding resonance across a wide range of languages and genres in the Philippines. Ick (2020) argues that despite the play's absence in the curricula of the American-run public school system and the disapproval of Church-run private schools throughout the past century, *Romeo*

and Juliet is the most translated, published, and circulated Shakespearean play in the Philippines.

During the early stages of the project, we explored the unique interest aroused in Filipino readership and popular culture by the tragic romance of Romeo and Juliet. Ick writes that the vernacularization of Romeo and Juliet into local forms, such as the awit and sarswela in the 20th century and modernized, abridged adaptations, communicates an attachment to the text that goes beyond colonial influence and mimicry. Instead, she writes that "reading audiences in the vernacular were in all likelihood wrenched by the tragic fate of true love in Romeo and Juliet and consoled by its promise of a better future against all odds" (2013). This is owed to a largely conservative and heterosexual social order, coupled with vast economic inequalities. Romance, for the Filipino, becomes the ground for the dramatization of social divide as well as a hopeful overcoming of such "tragedies" of birth. It is no surprise then, that *Romeo and Juliet* has found a home among the many pocket-books, teleseryes, radio dramas, and mainstream movies that have been in popular circulation since the American colonial period.

The shooting of the film was facilitated by a production team that consisted of the two authors, also acting as Romero and Huli, Monica Stohner as the director, and a local guide from the Daraitan Tour Guide Association arranged through Jovelyn Penaojas. The film's shots and sounds were edited by Augusto

Ledesma and Klane Zurbano, in line with the multi-lingual and queer framing of the translation. The filming and editing was a collaborative process among the team, owing to the site-specific nature of the tradaptation and how those natural elements may be translated into visual and auditory cues that foreground the project's linguistic and aesthetic interventions. The locations along the river were part of the established walking path that winds through the gorge and passes through the boundaries of Barangay Daraitan in Tanay, Rizal, and the ancestral lands of the Dumagat-Remontado indigenous community in Gen. Nakar, Quezon Province.

The languages featured in our adaptation, Bikol and Hiligaynon, are two of the eight major languages in the Philippines, spoken by 1,033,457 and 1,933,512 households respectively (PSA, 2023). The writers of this project hail from the two provinces where these languages are primarily spoken, Bicol in Southern Luzon and Iloilo in Western Visayas, and were inspired by the tales of "star-crossed" lovers that frame the landscape of these regions. The Mayon volcano, found in Albay, Bicol and greatly admired for its beauty, is said to have emerged from the grave of Daragang Magayon (beautiful maiden). Ulap (cloud), her love, was killed in the middle of tribal conflict caused by their union and in every iteration of the myth, Daragang Magayon herself dies, mirroring the fate that her love had suffered (Bobis, 1994). Today, the lovers are believed to be reuniting beyond death whenever Mayon's

perfect peak is hidden behind clouds. Mount Kanlaon located in Negros Occidental, Western Visayas, follows a similar mythological origin. Kang, a princess known for her beauty, fell in love with Laon, a prince from a neighboring kingdom. The lovers chose to die together rather than be forced apart by their feuding families. The mountain, known to be the highest peak in the Visayas region, is said to have emerged from where the two lovers were laid to rest (Salindo, 2021). We see in these narratives a unique confluence between humanistic, romantic love and the natural, physical environment, where the contours of earth itself serve as the resolution for true, forbidden, and undying love.

In rendering this fusion of local myth and Shakespearean text, our approach to the Bikol and Hiligaynon translation was informed by the work of literary scholars Dr. Judy Ick and Dr. Ma. Lorena Santos on unpublished translations of *Romeo and Juliet* in the regions. They note that there have been few documented attempts to translate Shakespeare texts into Bikol, notably a translation of Romeo and Juliet in an indigenous variety and an unpublished modernized translation entitled "Ang Kaherak-herak na Pagkaminootan na Romeo & Juliet" staged at the Ateneo de Naga University (Santos, 2023). Further, Dr. Lorena Santos's work on Bikol translations of Shakespeare's sonnets foreground an inclination in certain translators to weave different varieties of Bikol into the translation of a single sonnet, thereby resisting a "Standard Bikol" translation characterized mainly by the Central

Bikol variety spoken in Naga City. We were inspired by this multi-lingual and multi-vocal approach to Shakespeare and so we asked Dr. Santos for permission to access copies of unpublished Bikol translations by Rodolfo Alano. Upon consulting with the poet's family, we were given digital copies of the type-written translation of Act 2, Scene 2 which served as one of the frames for the Bikol translation.

In Hiligaynon, Salvador Magno's unpublished Hiligaynon sarswela, *Romeo kag Julieta* (1932), was adapted into a three-act sarswela form and features two balcony scenes that allow for dramatic duets by the lead characters. In the same way, Rosalio Imperial Sr.'s version of Romeo and Juliet, *Maogma Asin Mamundong Agi-Agi Kan Inaguihan na Buhay ni Romeo asin Juliet sa Ciudad Nin Verona* (1968), is derived from the awit and corrido tradition and interestingly adds moralistic admonitions to parents, young men, and women, specifically warning young men to be wary of "modern" women (Ick, 2013). These examples of vernacularization do not only show an inclination toward local textual forms, they also surface and affirm heteronormative readings of romantic and gender relations within *Romeo and Juliet*. In Alano's unpublished Bikol translation, for instance, Act 2 Scene 2 is shortened, reducing Juliet's lines to those uttered only in response to Romeo's seeking her promise to marry in the morning. Our translation, then, has aimed to preserve not only the lyricism

of the original, but also the agentic cues that it bestows upon both Romeo and Juliet.

With this departure from heteronormative scripts in mind, our queer translation of Romeo's and Juliet's lines was facilitated by the gender-neutral grammar structure of both Bikol and Hiligaynon– Romeo became Romero, the local word for rosemary, and Juliet, Huli. We strayed from Shakespeare's iambic pentameter and allowed the cadence of the more "faithful" lexical and syntactic translations to shape the exchange and turn-taking between our lovers. Bikol is marked by multiple points of stress that can occur in a single word, driving Huli's pace to be more syllable-timed rather than stress-timed (Stevens, 1986), while Romero embraces the "loving" intonation that characterizes Hiligaynon, a song-like quality where utterances "go up and down like waves of the sea" (Gamao, 2023). Honing in on these stylistic opportunities within the target languages necessitated a collective approach to the act of translation. We enlisted the help of our mothers, sister, and grandmother in vernacularizing the balcony scene. This cross-generational encounter allowed for multiple registers within Bikol and Hiligaynon to mix and a hybrid voice to emerge from the project, in response to previous translations that privilege the standard variety of the target languages. Our project is thus informed by scholarship on Shakespeare tradaptations that recognize language as a "key site of political and cultural negotiation in the borderlands" (Gillen and Santos, 2023),

considering our linguistic repertoire as women in Metro Manila with histories of migration from Bikol and Iloilo. The project is an intervention on language hierarchies and the "borders" they manifest in Shakespeare's after-lives in the Philippines, where political and economic migration to the nation's capital exert pressure on regional languages' political and cultural status.

Thus, the "fidelity" of our translation serves two ends: (1) staying faithful to the poetic possibilities within the target languages without (2) losing the lyrical texture of the original exchange. Allusions to beauty, romance, and transgression were wrested from their gendered valences and interpreted in line with the semantic fields present within the target languages. Huli's Bikol translation found a home in the religious metaphors of the original, but where Shakespeare's text foregrounds God, a male figure, as the object of worship, our translation favored the santa (saints), of variable genders, following local practices in the Philippines that favor the veneration of saints (Yalung, 2011). Translating to Hiligaynon was framed by certain lexical entries in the original text that required semantic clarification, specifically in identifying the closest translation and choosing the most appropriate synonyms to match the original text. The Hiligaynon translation of the bible then became a central reference in preserving the lyrical elements of the original in translating Romero's lines. Our departure from the "tradition" of vernacularization of Romeo and Juliet in the Philippines is then

marked by a refusal to inherit the heteronormative gender dynamic of previous translations, while keeping close to the cadence of the original's immersion in two different languages.

When it comes to queer cinematic adaptations of the star-crossed lovers, the independent film *Rome and Juliet* (2006) served as one of the visual frames for our project. In this movie, a wedding planner named Rome falls in love with a teacher, Juliet, whose wedding to a local politician she was hired to organize. They navigate the trappings of traditional, conservative society as both Rome and Juliet slowly come to embrace their budding romance. The film ultimately subverts the tragedy of the original but not without the lovers' being fatally tested– Juliet almost dies in a car accident before she can choose Rome. This alternative and hopeful ending is made possible by the adaptation's situating of the lovers in a religious, yet middle-class and urban setting. Though the heteronormative expectations of their families and peer groups are expressed, Rome and Juliet are able to pursue sexual and socio-economic independence through the spaces of the city: Rome lives in her own apartment, Juliet's musings about love are played out in public transport and her queer feelings expressed in a small poetry reading, and the two of them meet often inside a church or a restaurant. These spaces allow the adaptation to dramatize the social burden that Rome and Juliet feel as women with wayward desires, while offering them moments of intimate connection. Though decidedly queer, this

adaptation is interestingly in line with Philippine adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that triumph love as a central and particularly "redemptive" (Ick, 2020) theme.

Act 2, Scene 2 of Romeo and Juliet is often portrayed within the bounds of the Capulet mansion, where the balcony serves theatrical and narratological functions. The lovers are separated by the balcony, contrasting Juliet's isolated and limited position above with Romeo's (in)visible and transgressive position below. Romeo's transgression is characterized by his overcoming of the Capulets' walls and the danger that threatens him should he be found. Their strained yet playful exchange is then framed by these rigid borders. It is worth noting, however, that the "balcony" was not originally part of Shakespeare's text, and initially appeared in the stagings of Thomas Otway's Roman military re-imagining of *Romeo and Juliet* entitled, *The History and Fall of Caius Marius* (1679)-- "When Otway's Lavinia wonders, "O Marius, Marius! wherefore art thou Marius?" she does so following a stage direction included by Otway that explicitly places her 'in the Balcony'" (Leveen, 2017). This direction influenced subsequent stagings of *Romeo and Juliet* in London in the 18th century, and has become a narrative and cultural symbol for the star-crossed lovers across its many adaptations since then. In our site-specific interpretation of the "balcony" scene, we respond to the structural dominance of the balcony by situating Romero and Huli's encounter along where water and rock meet, their

movements following the contours of the river bank. The river engendered a tactile sensitivity to our staging, where Romero and Huli can touch, in the daylight, observed only by the rapids and plant-life. The emerging romance is externalized in the flowing and seamless touching of water and rock, away from the walls and gates of society.

The film's editing mirrors our adaptation's refusal of spatial borders between Romero and Huli. The scenes flow and overlap with one another, resulting in frames where the lovers are doubled and embedded within the rock. This also achieves a unique effect on the characterization of the lovers, where it is not immediately clear to the viewer who is "Romeo" and who is "Juliet." The adaptation plays with the gendered roles and movements of the characters, found in earlier Philippine translations and adaptations, through its portrayal of the two women as both lover and beloved, both agents whose movements meet and reflect one another. This frames the two languages in the translation as significant narrative anchors: the lovers' multiple and interchangeable roles simultaneously draws attention to and bridges the gap between the different languages that they speak. With this, the film ends right before another voice interrupts the lovers, the nurse calling Juliet back into her room, leaving the viewer with Huli's declaration of a love as deep and boundless as the sea.

Tinipak river, nestled within the Sierra Madre mountain range in General Nakar, Quezon Province, served as the site for this sensuous staging. Named after "tipak," meaning large shards, the river is known for its winding rapids and limestone rock formations that create a unique, geo-diverse topography. The residents from Barangay Daraitan in Tanay, Rizal and the indigenous community of the Dumagat-Remontado live along this river, and rely on it for natural resources and income as a tourist attraction. This site sustains our engagement with the folk narratives of Mt. Mayon in Bicol and Mt. Kanlaon in Negros: creation myths that foreground an undying love as the foundation of the natural world, and enlist the wind, clouds, and earth as characters in the tragic narrative. Tinipak river today is embroiled in a tragic narrative of its own; it has become a contested site in recent years due to the planned construction of the Kaliwa dam which threatens to flood the river community, along with its geological and cultural heritage. In situating Romeo and Juliet within this environment, the short film not only provides an affective contrast to the human borders that separate the lovers in Shakespeare's text, it also serves to document the river in the present, amid uncertainties regarding its future.

Tamwa-anay sa Balkonahe: Romero kag Huli presents a tradaptation that re-homes Shakespeare in the languages and environments of the Philippines. It is a site-specific, multi-lingual performance that draws from existing local translations and

adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet,* as it pushes the boundaries of the play's setting and characterization. The natural world as the setting for the romance frames the star-crossed lovers alongside local mythological narratives and recasts the "forbidden" love between two women as integral to the forming of the earth itself. The language of the translation is central to this effort and while the process of translation to Bikol and Hiligaynon aimed to preserve the lyrical texture of the original, we pursued the semantic opportunities within the target languages, allowing the project to resist heteronormative readings found in earlier translations of *Romeo and Juliet*.

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