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WHY CITIES WEEP

(a translation of five chapters of *Por qué lloran las ciudades* by Elisa Levi)

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Introduction

The unnamed woman in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* talks about her past and mourns what was and what might have been. Lost and reflecting on her memories, with post-WWII Hiroshima both in the foreground and background, she struggles with the sorrow and grief that consumed her while locked inside the basement of her family home, trapped by her sin of loving someone she should not have loved. As she wanders around Hiroshima, followed by the Japanese man who has fallen in love with her, she tries to numb herself to everything, seemingly ignoring her otherness in a country with a culture and a language she cannot understand.

Like the Frenchwoman in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Ada, the main character of *Por qué lloran las ciudades* by Elisa Levi wanders the streets, but of Tokyo, also mourning what was and what might have been. However, instead of grieving for the lives cut short by the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima or for a love that she has lost, she is struggling with the suicide of her best friend, Denis. The news falls upon her like the Hiroshima bomb: sudden, painful, and devastating. The event pulls her out of her skin and forces her to travel to Japan, where people neither touch nor cry in public, and the place where Denis lost his own war.

Levi takes us along on Ada's journey, giving us a glimpse into her mind as she struggles to come to terms with Denis's death. She takes too much Lexotan, an anxiolytic, lives with anxiety and depression and has a compulsive ritual of tapping her fingertips on the tip of her right thumb. Ada writes poetry in which she expresses her innermost feelings, everything she seems to be afraid to say out loud, such as the shame she believes she has been taught to feel,

shame about who she is, her feelings, and her desires. She writes about her relationship with Denis and even about her dysfunctional relationship with her mother.

I stumbled upon *Por qué lloran las ciudades* while looking through a list of novels that included both mental illness and LGBTQIA+ issues as part of the story. The story drew me in and left me devastated. By the time I finished it, I knew I wanted to translate it. Initially, I feared the text would not be challenging enough for this academic exercise, partly because of its often short and seemingly simple sentences, and I hesitated to bring it forth as an option. Fortunately, my advisor approved the text, and I set out to translate it.

One of the reasons I was drawn to the novel and thought it worth translating was that Elisa Levi does not shy away from controversial topics. Levi explores social and cultural themes that have gained attention and visibility in twenty-first-century globalized culture. She writes about issues considered controversial not only in Hispanic cultures, but in countries around the world. She addresses mental health (substance abuse, anxiety, and depression) and suicide. In the same context, she addresses survivor's guilt and the stages of grief. Levi's novel is a reminder that mental illness and suicide are still considered dirty secrets. Her novel gives a voice to those silenced by stigma.

As someone who lives with mental illness, I thought she offered an accurate representation of thought patterns and behavior consistent with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and maybe even obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD (International OCD Foundation). Mental illness and suicide are highly stigmatized in Puerto Rico and around the world (Hernández). Not only does this novel help me feel seen, but it also acknowledges the pain and

silence of people who choose suicide because they feel alone and overwhelmed, unable to seek the help they need.

Levi also addresses the queer experience through both Ada, who lives with her girlfriend, and Denis, who seems to be openly gay. Ada's mother is homophobic and dislikes Denis because of it. With her indifference, she invalidates the existence of people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, including her own daughter.

LGBTQIA+ representation is relevant to current media. The demand for more media representation has become a widespread issue in the United States in recent years. The novel offers a look into the otherness experienced by this community, as well as the mental health community, from the Hispanic-European perspective of a Millennial. Furthermore, the author focuses on otherness in general, especially when experienced by foreigners, and the culture shock that Ada confronts as a Spanish woman in Japan.

The novel also required some literary analysis and a deep understanding of the themes, not only on their own, but within different cultural contexts and current social movements. On the matter of intertextuality, I had to read the texts, listen to music, and watch the movies that Ada refers to in the novel. Doing so helped me get a deeper sense of the themes of the story, and to understand Ada, her frame of mind, and the general atmosphere.

Aside from making several references to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* throughout the novel, *Por qué lloran las ciudades* integrates stylistic elements characteristic of the *nouveau roman*, the literary movement with which Marguerite Duras, the writer of the film's screenplay, was associated. Joseph Pivato describes the *nouveau roman* style as being "deceptively simple in sentence structure, vocabulary and straight-forward narrative content with few characters and

minimal dialogue” (Pivato 2016). Additionally, authors associated with this movement often wrote in the present tense (Freed-Thall 513). In *Por qué lloran las ciudades*, the author has the reader follow an unreliable narrator, offering Ada’s internal monologue as our only window into the truth. Her sentences are short and to the point, and her manner of speech is colloquial. She often summarizes conversations rather than offer dialogue. Only Ada and Denis have names, though their surnames are never mentioned, while every other character might as well be a movie extra.

I chose to translate chapters one through five of the novel. The narrative discusses grief, mental illness, suicide, survivor’s guilt, homophobia, cultural shock, and otherness. The novel is told in first-person point of view and written in a stream-of-consciousness style. It contains many references to pop culture, such as movies, music, and poetry.

Book Summary

Por qué lloran las ciudades follows Ada, a young woman who finds out that her best friend Denis has died by suicide, and that he has named her the executor of his will and his universal heir. This event forces her to travel from Denmark, where she resides with her girlfriend, to Tokyo, Japan, where Denis lived.

Throughout her time there, Ada reflects on her relationship with Denis, his life, his death, and both the grief and betrayal she feels over his suicide. She meets his roommate, a man she refers to as “el chico rubio” without ever mentioning his name. She tries to deal with culture shock and remembers things that Denis used to tell her about Japanese culture, such as

how people do not touch one another or cry, even as she is desperate for human contact because she feels so empty and untethered.

She feels like she is an actor or a character in a film and often imagines that an invisible camera is following her around. She also goes through the experience of being the other, a foreigner in a country that she describes plainly, yet mostly without much detail. She does not speak or read Japanese, so she cannot understand the signs, nor does she make any attempt to learn the language.

Ada finds Denis's journal and some pieces of writing that remind her of a man named Hiro who Denis had loved desperately. Their relationship ended in heartbreak, yet Ada cannot stop wondering about him, where he is, and if he knows about Denis's death. She searches for him in everything and everyone she sees, until she develops a relationship with the Hiro in her imagination.

About the Author

Elisa Levi was born in Madrid in June 1994. She studied audiovisual communication and performing arts at Universidad Europea de Madrid and theater arts at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London (Planeta). She is a poet, a novelist, and a playwright. She published her first collection of poems *Perdida en un bol de cereales* in 2019, then published *Por qué lloran las ciudades*, her first novel, in 2019. Recently, she published her second novel, *Yo no sé de otras cosas*, in 2021. She also wrote the play *Ramitas en el pelo*, which opened in Madrid in 2017.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one focuses on Ada as she is leaving Japan and traveling to Spain. The beginning finds her standing on the famous crossing in Shibuya in Tokyo. She recently had her hair cut to shoulder length, and she feels the need for human contact even as she remembers that Denis told her that in Japan people do not touch one another.

Ada engages in compulsive behaviors, tapping her fingertips on the tip of her right thumb, as if she were counting something. As she walks, she pretends that she is a character in a science fiction movie, being filmed by an invisible camera. At the airport, she reaches the end of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the screenplay of the film (directed by Alain Resnais), which was written by Marguerite Duras. Ada writes poetry verses in a notebook she carries.

Once on her way to Madrid, she mentions that she has a Lexotan pill, an anxiolytic. She mentions Denis, who has died by suicide and the reason why she was in Japan. Her sisters pick her up at the airport. They both show indifference toward Denis's death, dismissing Ada when she realizes she forgot to buy statice flowers or *siemprevivas* in Spanish.

The older sister disapproves of Ada's compulsion, the same as their mother. Ada describes all three as bitter and unhappy, and their father as someone for whom she feels sorry. Her mother clearly disapproves of Ada, stopping her from finishing her compulsive ritual of tapping her fingertips on her thumb, and pretending that Ada is not taking a Lexotan.

Chapter two goes back in time to the day that Denis died and marks the beginning of the chronological telling of the story. It begins with the title, which is also the city it takes place in, Copenhagen, followed by a few lines from the poem "Excess of Life" by Juan Antonio González Iglesias.

Ada narrates the events of the day she finds out about Denis's death, which occurs a month after David Bowie's death. She lives in Copenhagen with her girlfriend, Nadine, and her dog, Clara. Even though Ada and Denis kept in touch through smartphone apps, they would send each other letters through the mail. They felt like the main characters in the movie *Only Lovers Left Alive*, starring Tilda Swinton and Tom Hiddleston as Eve and Adam, respectively, which is about pair of vampires who are married yet live apart, and their connection never changes even if the world around them does.

Ada receives a large package in the mail, a box filled with static flowers and a CD containing the song "Divina," by the Spanish band Radio Futura. The Ada living that day is not aware that Denis has already died, while the Ada narrating mentions each action and thought that goes through her mind along with comments of the things she would have done if she had known he was gone. She describes different events as if an invisible camera were filming everything and writes poetry in her notebook. When she returns a call from an unfamiliar and long phone number, a Japanese nurse tells her that Denis has died and that she is his contact person.

Chapter three begins with a poem in which Ada expresses her pain, emptiness, and sorrow. She recalls her father's work in a newsstand and how she felt spending time inside it. She and her younger sister would leaf through magazines, and she would steal gum and remember the female junkie whom she would always see on the corner or her way back home. Denis would come pick her up.

At Narita International Airport, Ada meets Denis's roommate, whom she refers to as "el chico rubio" throughout the entire novel. In the car, he chatters away about Denis and how his

now-deceased roommate used to tell him about Ada. She feels that he is insensitive and indifferent to Denis's death.

On their way to the hospital, Ada notices a schoolgirl who reminds her of Chieko, a character in the movie *Babel*, and feels a certain kinship with her.

Once at the hospital, they find out that Denis died due to a combination of different medications: anxiolytics, antidepressants, antibiotics, and sleeping medication. Afterward, she meets with a lawyer who reads Denis's last will and testament. In it, Denis appoints her the executor of his estate and his universal heir, and leaves instructions on what to do with his possessions. He also gives specific instructions regarding his funeral and burial.

Ada writes a long poem dedicated to Chieko, the deaf character in *Babel*, in which she includes other characters and elements of the film. In it, she focuses on the emptiness and sorrow that the character Chieko feels after the loss of her mother.

After she finishes signing the papers, Ada is taken to the morgue, where she sees Denis's body. She thinks he looks relaxed, and she seems to accept his death and even thinks she can understand it. Later, Ada writes the email she plans on sending to Denis's friends and family to inform them of his death and the funeral. The email is angry and defiant. She believes no one cares about Denis.

Ada spends time in Denis's bedroom. She finds empty Lexotan blisters and pieces of static flowers. When the blond guy comes home, she asks him about the day Denis died. He tells her that the cleaning woman found Denis and called the ambulance. Ada writes a poem about love and forgiveness. She continues to think about Denis and what his death means to her and their relationship.

In chapter four, Ada offers some more insight into her relationship with her mother after a flashback in which Ada seduces one of her cousins at a wedding and gets found out. She realizes that she needs a loving mother to help her get through the situation, but her mother shows her a lack a compassion, per usual. Right after, Ada finds the book *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, which has been bookmarked.

She remembers that Denis once told her about a man he dated he would call “the Japanese lover.” Denis was happy and in love, then suffered terribly when they broke up. When the blond guy returns home, she discovers that he is not indifferent to Denis like she first thought. He is angry at Denis, wondering why Denis killed himself and why he wasn’t his contact person, choosing instead Ada, who lived in another country. Ada tries to seduce him. Later, their conversation makes her think about Denis. She asks him why he killed himself and why he did not contact her or say anything before he did.

Chapter five begins with a piece of writing by Denis that Ada finds inserted inside the pages of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. It reads like a love letter. Later, after avoiding friends of both Denis and the blond man, Ada finds more bits of writing. She has a flashback of a younger Denis and Ada, dancing while drunk, maybe even high, wondering how to tell their parents that they are gay. After the visitors leave, she seduces the blond guy.

Every chapter features poetry written by Ada, which can be read as reflections on her state of mind. Her writing seems to be therapeutic, somewhat, especially since she does not appear to be comfortable talking with other people. In her poetry, which is filled with metaphors and other literary devices, she mentions her mother, Denis, and her state of mind.

Translation Challenges

I encountered several challenges throughout the translation process. Unfamiliar vocabulary, language that might be considered obscene in Puerto Rico, film terms, and literary devices were some of them. The main character writes poetry that employs different literary devices that made some parts of them particularly challenging to translate.

The author is Spanish, and her dialect includes words that are not commonly used in Puerto Rico or that may have a different meaning. For example, *váter* meaning toilet, *salón* for living room, *folio* for page, and *marabunta*, which can be translated as a crowd of people. The text also contains a few loanwords, such as *yonqui*, adapted from the English “junkie,” *blíster* for a medication blister, “snacks,” and “discman.” Even though these words were easily found in the *Diccionario de la lengua española*, they initially hindered my understanding of the source text. I would also include the following words on the list: *dientes picados*, meaning rotten teeth, *cascos* or headphones, *americana*, which translates into blazer or sport jacket, and *edredón*, translated as quilt.

A clear difference between Puerto Rican and Spanish media is the use of words that may be considered obscene. It is uncommon to hear words such as *culo*, *puta*, and *joder* on Puerto Rican television, for example, and I admit that my cultural and even religious upbringing made me question just how explicit my translation of these words should be. For example, the main character, Ada, thinks, “Mi madre es una cabrona” (19) when her mother refuses to say Denis’s name when asking about his funeral. The logical translation was “My mother is a bitch,” yet I still hesitated.

Other words had ambiguous meanings. In chapter one, the main character says that she remembers the time that Denis lived in France “con la lejanía de un recuerdo enterrado entre malezas” (16). *Maleza* can be translated as weeds, thicket, or brushwood. I translated *malezas* as “overgrown weeds,” rendering the translation as follows: “with the distance of a memory buried among overgrown weeds.” The source text evokes a wild, messy, and disorganized space, and “overgrown” provides a clear image of this quality. A word with a similar issue is *quiosco*. Initially, I translated it as “kiosk” following my own understanding and experience with the word. In the source text, this *quiosco* sells newspapers, magazines, and candy. Ada’s description of her father’s job implies that he sells other type of merchandise. However, my advisor pointed out that the English equivalent is “newsstand,” and, even though a *quiosco* may not mean the exact same thing, I reconsidered and chose “newsstand.”

Deciding on the translation for the word *primario* in “he llegado a ese punto de la soledad en que se ha convertido en algo primario” (45) was a challenge. The main character is expressing her need for her mother or, rather, a loving and understanding mother. I considered “primal,” “primary,” and “primordial” as possible translations. In the end, I chose “primordial,” which can also mean “fundamental” (Merriam-Webster).

I had some difficulty deciding on whether to translate the names of two dogs, Zoco and Clara. Zoco can mean left-handed or refer to a person whose arms have been amputated. I’ve chosen the second meaning for this translation. The narrator mentions that Denis felt like he was lacking something, and Ada feels like his death has ripped something out of her. She could also mean that she dislikes how it sounds. The word is left unexplained in the translation because of its ambiguity.

The name Clara, which can mean light, clear, or obvious (Harper Collins), may symbolize and reflect the main character's state of mind before she learns about her friend's death. She was ignorant and happy before then. For this reason, I considered translating the name as Clare or Claire, which sound similar to "clear." However, I decided to leave the original name because it exists in English-speaking culture. Both Zoco and Clara are italicized throughout the novel, though the reason why is unclear. It may be up to the reader to determine the reason for the formatting decision, which I have chosen to respect.

Statice flowers, *siemprevivas* in Spanish, play an important part in the novel. Denis would buy them for Ada whenever he visited her in Spain, and a boxful of them arrives at her door the day he takes his own life. In the first chapter, Ada mentions, "Statice flowers, *siemprevivas*, 'everlastingly alive.' For all the life he lacked, that's why he'd buy *siemprevivas*." I thought about not translating the name of the flowers whenever it showed up in the source text because of this special meaning. In the end, I decided to keep the English translation since the importance of the name is clearly established the first time it is mentioned.

Both Ada and Denis take bromazepam, is a benzodiazepine prescribed for anxiety and sold in Spain under the brand name *Lexatín*. This medication is not available in the United States. Even though bromazepam is sold under different brand names, I chose the brand Lexotan, which is available in both Denmark and Japan, where the two main characters reside.

Ada feels as though she is being filmed by an invisible camera and describes the shots used in the scenes she visualizes. I found many of the cinematographic terms with a simple internet search, but finding some Spanish translations was a challenge. I confirmed most of the terms in Blain Brown's *Cinematography: Theory and Practice. Image Making for*

Cinematographers and Directors and its Spanish edition (Brown, 2008). I had trouble finding the term *plano corto* (*Por qué lloran* 31), which led me to confer with Cristina González Delgado, who has a master's degree in Media Studies from the New School. She read the relevant paragraph and suggested "close-up" because of the context.

Formatting details in the novel were addressed in the translation. I chose a sans serif font for my translation, while the print edition of the novel uses a serif font similar to Garamond. This posed a challenge when deciding what font to use for the cases in which the print book used a sans serif font. For example, Ada writes an email that appears in a sans serif font in order to differentiate it from the rest of the text (38). The same happens with text messages she exchanges with her girlfriend, Nadine (44), and her mother (45). Originally, I used Times New Roman for these portions of the text. Later on, my advisor suggested I use a different sans serif font. This made sense because most email and texting apps, such as WhatsApp and Gmail, use sans serif fonts by default. In the end, I chose Arial in a smaller size.

Intertextuality

There are several instances of intertextuality in the novel. Levi quotes poetry and music lyrics and makes references to films. Each reference speaks to the themes in the novel or to the main character's state of mind. The book opens with a line from the Spanish translation of Anne Sexton's "Wanting to Die" (*Por qué lloran* 9), and, later, she adds the lyrics to the song "Divina" by the Spanish band Radio Futura (24). I was not able to find a translation for the song, so I translated the lyrics myself. The first, "David Bowie lo sabe, y tu mami también," was translated

as “David Bowie knows it and so does your mom,” and the second, “Te veo bailar con pegatinas en el culo,” I translated as “I see you dancing with stickers on your ass.”

Levi quotes a few lines from the poem “Exceso de vida” by poet Juan Antonio González Iglesias right before chapter two. However, the source text misidentifies the title of the poem as “Eros es más,” which is the title of the poetry collection it belongs to. I’ve added a published translation of the poem and its title, “Excess of Life” (González Iglesias).

Table 1

González Iglesias’ “Excess of Life” Issues and Solutions

Poem	Translation
<p>Desde que te conozco tengo en cuenta la muerte. Pero lo que presiento no se parece en nada A la común tristeza.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Eros es más, Juan Antonio González-Iglesias</p>	<p>I have been thinking about death since I met you. But what I have in mind is nothing like common sorrow.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">“Excess of Life” Juan Antonio González Iglesias</p>
Issue	Solution
<p>The quoted lines belong to a poem with a different title, which made it challenging to find at the time.</p>	<p>After some online searching, I found that <i>Eros es más</i> is the title of the anthology in which the poem was published. I found a bilingual translation of the anthology, translated by Curtis Bauer.</p>

In the third chapter, Levi adds a quote by Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Poco importa si como un rey la quise” (*Por qué lloran* 39). The author does not specify the source, and I was unable to find these exact words anywhere, however, I could identify elements of the line as part of the poem “Le Belle Bandiere” (*Pier Paolo Pasolini* 138). I found a Spanish translation by Guillermo Fernández, whose translation of the original line, “Non importa se so che l’ho voluta, come un re” (*Pier Paolo Pasolini* 140), does not match Levi’s, which led me to assume that the translation

may be her own. Out of the few English translations that I was able to find, I chose the translation which more closely matched Levi’s own, “No matter that, like a king, I willed it” (*Pier Paolo Pasolini* 141).

Table 2

Pier Paolo Pasolini’s “Le Belle Bandiere” and Translations

Author/Translator	Line of the Poem	Information	Solution
Elisa Levi	Y añado una cita de Pasolini: «No importa si como un rey la quise».	Levi’s own translation.	
Pier Paolo Pasolini	Non importa se so che l’ho voluta, come un re.	Original Italian. Searched for the Italian words for “king” and “want.” Once I found the poem in Italian, I was able to search for a Spanish translation.	
Guillermo Fernández	No importa si sé que la he elegido, como un rey.	Only official Spanish translation I had access to.	
Norman MacAfee	No matter that like a king, I willed it.	This is one of two translations I found.	Chosen because it’s similar to Levi’s translation.
Jack Hirschman	Never mind that I know I’ve willed it like a king.	This is one of two translations I found.	

The main character makes comments about Japanese culture while she is in Japan. On one occasion, she remarks on the Japanese custom to sit on the floor as she does so, saying, “porque aquí la vida se hace en el suelo,” followed by “De la tierra venimos y en tierra nos convertimos” (*Por qué lloran* 56). This is commonly translated as “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” (Wood 338). The line this phrase originates from appears in Genesis 3:19, and there is a similar line in Ecclesiastes 3:20. However, this translation does not fit because of the reference to the Japanese custom of sitting on the floor or the ground. After reviewing the translation of both

verses in different bibles, I chose the translation of Ecclesiastes 3:20 found in the *Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version (CEV)*, “We are made from earth, and we return to earth.”

Table 3

Comparison of the Biblical Reference in the Source Text and Translations

Author/Source	Source text	Genesis 3:19	Ecclesiastes 3:20
Elisa Levi	La acepto y nos sentamos en los cojines del salón, en el suelo, porque aquí la vida se hace en el suelo. De la tierra venimos y en tierra nos convertimos.		
The Book of Common Prayer	...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...		
New King James Version (NKJV)		For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.	All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust.
Contemporary English Version (CEV)		...you were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil.	We are made from earth, and we return to earth.

Despite its short and deceptively simple sentences, *Por qué lloran las ciudades* turned out to be an even bigger challenge than I had initially expected. I tried to treat the subject matter and all of the themes that Elisa Levi discusses in the novel with the seriousness and respect they deserve. Each of them and the story itself matter to me personally, and I believe that the world needs to open up to treating mental illness and suicide as normal parts of the human experience in order to erase the stigma associated with them. I believe that this novel and others like it could help this happen. Not only did I love and admire the source text since I first read it but having to deconstruct it in order to render what I endeavored to be a faithful

translation was possibly the most satisfying and rewarding experience of both my academic career and my life as a translator.

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