

Always in Translation

Trans Cinema across Languages

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Abstract This article examines the role of audiovisual translation in the cinematic circulation of trans knowledge. Through a case study of the Cantonese-dubbed version of the Thai-language film *The Iron Ladies* in Hong Kong, the article analyzes a regional production of trans meanings that negotiates between local subjectivities and globalized categories. The article also demonstrates the importance of a multilingual approach to the study of trans cinema.

Keywords trans cinema, audiovisual translation, dubbing

A small kerfuffle broke out during the Q & A session with filmmaker Sebastiano d'Ayala Valva after a screening of his documentary *Transvestites Also Cry* (2007) at the 2009 Netherland Transgender Film Festival.¹ Several audience members noisily walked out, apparently offended by the filmmaker's use of the term *transvestite* and the pronoun he deployed for the subjects in his film. The documentary, which portrays two trans migrant sex workers from Ecuador working in Paris's Bois de Boulogne, was filmed over the course of three years (and would continue for another three, resulting in a follow-up film *Angel* [dir. Sebastiano d'Ayala Valva, 2010]). Displaying a respectful intimacy and close collaboration with its subjects, the film is a far cry from the kind of ignorant or exploitative voyeurism that might warrant the offense expressed by the audience members who walked out. Filmed in Paris by an Anglo-Italian filmmaker featuring two Ecuadorians who mostly communicate in Spanish, the film's titular *transvestites* is an attempt to approximate *travesti*, a term with a complex and contested history that is not readily translatable into any equivalent in English (Kulick 1998; Lancaster 1998; Lewis 2006; La Fountain-Stokes 2014). The title references a direct quotation from Romina, one of the film's subjects, who says, "Everybody cries . . . *Travestis* also cry." At the Q & A, D'Ayala Valva explained that he used *he* to refer to Mia, the other subject of the film, because that was how Mia—who often dressed in masculine clothing outside of work despite explicit

feminine identification—asked to be spoken of outside of filming. In the documentary, *travesti*, *homosexual*, and *tercer sexo* (third sex) are used at different times by Romina and Mia to refer to themselves and their friends, and their use of gendered pronouns is not always consistent. What is clear is that there is no *one* way—not in a title, in a choice of pronoun, even less in a translation practice—to capture the experience, feelings, and identity of the people the film is portraying. The difficulty of cultural and linguistic transfer is evident in the discrepancy between the connotation of *transvestite* in English and that of *travesti* in Spanish and Portuguese. Such difficulty also highlights the broader challenge of rendering trans lives intelligible to culturally and linguistically diverse audiences. Expectations that translation is supposed to facilitate recognition and a sense of community at a venue such as a transgender film festival often result in frustration or, in this case, offense.

The situation at the screening reminds me of a story David Valentine tells from his fieldwork with a support group in New York where some of the gender-nonconforming participants understand their own lives through terms (such as *transvestite* or *fem queen* or *gay*) that are perceived by many service providers, activists, and scholars to be incorrectly conflating gender and sexual identities and thus outmoded. Valentine observes that these participants feel pressured to be “educated into a more enlightened understanding of identity” (Valentine 2006: 417) that is more in line with the classifications sanctioned in academic and activist circles. Valentine’s study traces the conditions specific to the emergence of *transgender* as the preferred umbrella term adopted in scholarship, policy, and community contexts for gender identity, one that is unambiguously differentiated from expressions of desire and sexual identity (Valentine 2007). This “sorting out” of gender from desire is important in illuminating some specific experiences of gender nonconformity that were hitherto misinterpreted as expressions of gay desire. At the same time, the reification of this categorical separation of gender from desire also unwittingly renders other experiences of gender nonconformity unacceptable and literally unspeakable. In a global context where English has become the dominant—many argue “imperialist”—language (Pennycook 2002; Phillipson 2009), Valentine’s critique of *transgender* is arguably more broadly applicable to gender and sexual categories in English when they encounter terms in other languages. Recent studies, whether from francophone Canadian (Namaste 2011), indigenous (Wesley 2014), or various Southeast and East Asian contexts (Garcia 2009; Boellstorff 2003; Jackson 2009; Kang 2009), show that the anglocentric dominance of terms from *gay* and *lesbian* to *queer* and *transgender* has the power to modulate and modify, if not erase entirely, ways of knowing gendered embodiment and sexual desire through other languages. At the very least, the reification of categories in English as the “correct” or nonoffensive way

to understand and express gender nonconformity has created a hierarchy of experiences and subjectivities. The practice of translation can be complicit with this hierarchy, but it also has the potential to disrupt it. In this article, my goal is to examine how meanings of trans embodiment and gendered relationality in film circulate across cultural and linguistic contexts through translation practices. Attending to issues of translation, an endeavor that is all too often neglected in the study of queer and trans cinema, shows us forms of encounter and ways of knowing that are not quite intelligible in English.

Audiovisual Translation

In Tejaswini Niranjana's account of the history of translation practices in colonial discourse, she shows how translation has long been deployed to reinforce hegemonic representations of colonized culture as static and fixed, which can be brought into being, transparently *as is*, through translation (Niranjana 1992). Yet, Niranjana also observes that the postcolonial translator's resistant strategy is not to retranslate "false" into "true" meaning. Rather, she illustrates how a postcolonial self-understanding of being "already . . . in translation" fosters a translation practice that aims to transform itself from a "containing" force into a "disruptive, disseminating one" (Niranjana 1992: 186). Similarly, examining translation in queer and trans contexts is not about adjudicating true or false ways to signify gendered embodiment and sexual desire. Rather, we pay attention to practices of translation in order to disrupt received notions that render some ways of knowing more acceptable than others. In so doing, we lay the groundwork for a more linguistically diverse framework for disseminating knowledge about gender and sexual nonconformity.

Cinema, of course, signifies through more than verbal expressions. Even if *Transvestites Also Cry* had been more "correctly"—if awkwardly—translated as "Transgender People Also Cry," there would still be plenty of visual and non-verbal elements in the film that signal noncoherence between categories, identities, and experience. Furthermore, as new media technology enables an ever more diverse array of translation strategies for audiovisual texts, the potential for translation to keep in play, rather than contain, the diversity of significance is greatly increasing. Multiple options for subtitles and audio dubs in different languages are widely available on DVD formats. The relative ease with which one can now create "fan subs" (fan-made subtitles)—or the technically more challenging "fan dub" (fan dubbing)—means that viewers can provide their preferred translation for media that is distributed online. What used to be a specialized practice requiring professional skill is now increasingly open to participation and disruption by an interactive audience and fan communities. A disgruntled audience member may walk out during a screening, but a YouTube

viewer would be more likely to provide their own comments, preferred subtitles, or dub, which others can, in turn, challenge and discuss or offer their own counter versions, thereby proliferating, rather than shutting down, signification.

In this quickly evolving media context, the study of what used to be termed “film translation” is rightly more broadly conceptualized now as “audiovisual translation” to include source texts and translation practices that involve both audio and visual elements. Covering a diverse range of texts from feature films and vines to video games and karaoke, audiovisual translation (AVT) studies has been an emergent field within translation studies for the past two decades. In a survey of the field’s development, Jorge Diaz Cintas notes its shift from a focus on the technical aspects of the professional practice to a “cultural turn” that begins to pay attention to the “cultural embeddedness” of AVT. In particular, there is increasing attention paid to how notions of race, class, and gender, in conjunction with censorship and other institutional constraints, affect the ways audiovisual meanings are “transferred” across linguistic contexts (Diaz Cintas 2009: 8; De Marco 2012: 65–70). Furthermore, the absolute dominance of English “as the main working language in all stages of the AVT industry . . . production, distribution, and exhibition” (Diaz Cintas 2009: 10) means that studying AVT is at core also a study in anglocentrism and the ways in which its cultural hegemony is negotiated globally. There is also a direct affinity between AVT and disability studies that is as yet not fully explored. The core strategies Dias Cintas lists for AVT are intimately connected to technology for accessibility; the development of subtitling for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing (SDH) and audio description (AD) for the blind and the partially sighted closely relate to that of subtitling, voice-over, and dubbing (Diaz Cintas 2009: 3).

Given the significance of the field, it is surprising that AVT studies has not had much general impact on film studies and even less on queer and trans film studies. It may partly be due to the highly context-specific and technical nature of AVT studies, which often demands specific language expertise from its readers. It may also be partly due to an anglocentric blindness in English-language scholarship that takes access to non-English-language films for granted without considering how that access is always facilitated through translation. For a more specific examination of how audiovisual translation facilitates the circulation, interpretation, and transformation of trans representations on-screen, I turn now to a case study. Through an analysis of how dubbing was used in Hong Kong to turn a “foreign” Thai film into a local entertainment event, I examine an inter-Asian circulation of trans representations on-screen that neither reproduces the dominant transgender imaginary nor adheres to nativist narratives of local formations. Rather, the film as a site of translation signifies a regional production of trans meanings that are in negotiation with, but not erased by, globalized

categories. I also intend the case study to serve more broadly as an example of a multilingual approach to queer and trans film studies. I conclude with a brief example to show that trans knowledge on-screen, even in a seemingly monolingual anglophone context, is indeed always in translation.

The Adventures of the Iron Ladies in Hong Kong

The fifteenth anniversary of *The Iron Ladies* (dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, 2000) in 2015 was marked by the release of a remake, *Iron Ladies Roar!* (dir. Poj Arnon, 2015). The lack of English-language media coverage of the new release signals that there may not be any significant international publicity planned for the film beyond selected Asian markets. In contrast, the Chinese-language coverage in Hong Kong about the new film nostalgically recalls the massive success of the original film (Next Media 2014). Indeed, when *The Iron Ladies* screened in Hong Kong in 2000, it grossed a record-breaking US\$1.96 million, beating out *The Patriot* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in box-office shares. The fact that a modest-budget Thai-language comedy achieved such massive success over big Hollywood productions is surprising. That the film features a team of transgender volleyball players, with a marketing campaign that highlights issues of diversity and tolerance, makes its mainstream success even more unexpected. What can we learn about the circulation of trans images and meanings through this success?

It is instructive to compare the film's success in Hong Kong to its more conflicted reception in the West. Richard MacDonald and May Adadol Ingawanji's study of the film's reception narrates its global trajectory as follows: it achieved initial success as a mainstream commercial hit in Thailand, subsequently "crossing over" into the international film festival circuit as a warmly received "queer cultural event," but disappointingly ending as a critical and commercial failure in the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA)'s attempt to market it as a "world cinema" title (MacDonald and Ingawanij 2004). This narrative is useful in highlighting the discrepancy between the queer festival audience's expectations and that of art-house consumers. Contrasting the genre appeal of *The Iron Ladies* with the poetic and allegorical sensibility of gay male director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose works fit much more successfully into the "world cinema" canon, the study also illustrates what kind of queer and trans films "travel" best in the West and for what reasons. There are, however, two blind spots in this study. First, as Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim point out in their evaluation of transnational approaches in film studies, one drawback in studies that focus on transnational dynamics in production and reception is their tendency to "obscure the imbalances of power (political, economic, ideological)" inherent in the transnational exchange (Higbee and Lim 2010: 9). MacDonald and Ingawanij's study analyzes the reasons *The Iron Ladies* failed to attain "world cinema"

status but does not reflect on the power dynamics that establish the aesthetic criteria for such status. Second, as is typical of many discussions of cultural globalization, MacDonald and Ingawanij's narrative focuses on a binary trajectory from the non-West to the West, without paying attention to regional circulation that represents a different kind of global-local interaction. Audrey Yue calls approaches that attend to these interactions "critical regionalism": they examine the ways in which "syncretic practices are produced as a result of the intermingling of nativist and global forces that have come to impact the production of local LGBT cultures" (Yue 2014: 149). The regional circulation of *The Iron Ladies*' travel from Thailand to Hong Kong is an example of such an interaction. In contrast to the film's reception in Europe, the film was consumed in Hong Kong as neither a festival event nor a "world cinema" art-house title. Rather, it was transformed from a foreign film into star-studded local fare through an elaborately staged, celebrity-voiced dubbing of the film, which facilitates a syncretic encounter on-screen between distinct forms of trans subjectivities.

The rights to *The Iron Ladies* were bought by Hong Kong actress Sandra Ng, who acted on a prompt from actor and musician Leslie Cheung (Cai 2000). Cheung had seen the film in Thailand and recognized its potential to become a Pan-Asian hit, much like *Nang Nok* ([*Ghost Wife*] dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999) did the year before. Ng might also have been influenced by her husband, director Peter Chan, who was one of the earliest advocates for inter-Asian coproductions and collaborations (DeBoer 2014: 156–57). *The Iron Ladies* features two themes that, on their own, are readily familiar to Asian audiences. The genre of sports drama, in particular volley ball-themed drama, has been made popular by Japanese TV productions such as *V Is Our Sign* and *Burning Youth*, both giant hits in Hong Kong during the 1970s–80s. The popularity of Asian tourism in Thailand has resulted in a mainstream familiarity with *kathoey* culture (*kathoey* is a term used for a spectrum of trans-feminine persons in Thailand, as will be examined in more detail below). *The Iron Ladies* weds these two familiar themes together into a plot that is original but not too obscure for a mass audience. To further cement the film's mainstream appeal, Ng invested elaborate efforts into "localizing" the film through a Cantonese dub. Film and television dubbing in Hong Kong has been predominantly done by professional voice actors who do not have any individual profiles, thus ensuring that the dubbed version of a production obscures, rather than highlights, its dubbed character. Ng took an entirely different route for *The Iron Ladies* by explicitly marketing the dub itself as a high-profile celebrity event. Using her clout as a successful actress, she invited a cast of celebrities, including actors, comedians, and DJs to voice the main parts, based on a script with significant addition of local flavor through the use of local celebrity references and names, insider jokes, and even topical reinterpretations. Even the main

characters' names were changed to incorporate local and inter-Asian references: Mon is renamed "Sadako," which is a cheeky reference to the resemblance between the character's long hairstyle and that of the ghost in the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998); Jun is renamed "Joey" after Joey Yung, a popular local singer; Nong is likewise renamed "Pak-ji," the Cantonese name of actress Cecilia Cheung; Pia is renamed "Long Po," a term that plays on its resemblance to "girl with a boob job." In addition to these elaborate changes, the film's marketing campaign includes a music video featuring a Cantonese version of the film's theme song as well as a "making of" featurette comprising interviews with the entire dubbing cast.

Out of the twenty-three screens showing the film, only three screened the original Thai-language version, with the remaining twenty all screening the Cantonese-dubbed version. In Hong Kong, Chinese-language films are usually screened with both English and Chinese subtitles, to facilitate understanding for non-Sinophone speakers as well as Sinophone speakers who may not understand the particular Sinophone language (for example, Cantonese or Mandarin or Taiwanese) spoken on-screen. For the Cantonese-dubbed version of *The Iron Ladies*, the English subtitling uses a "back translation" of the Cantonese dialogues rather than a direct translation from the Thai version, while the Chinese subtitling uses written Cantonese rather than standard written Chinese. This absolute hegemony of the Cantonese version, even in dubbing and subtitling, betrays a confidence that the film needs only its local audience and that no other form of linguistic access to the film is necessary. Such a dubbing practice goes against the norm of the industry, in which English is usually the "pivot language" (Diaz Cintas 2009: 10). In other words, most non-English-language films would first be translated into English, a version that then provides the "master subtitles" for subtitling into other languages, or serves as the master script for dubbing dialogues into other languages. The Cantonese dub of *The Iron Ladies* not only bypasses English in its translation process, but it is used to actively block alternative linguistic access to the film. In so doing, it asserts itself as the primary, rather than derivative, version of the film in Hong Kong. The success of this dubbing model also provides the film with a form of international circulation that deviates from the "world cinema" model or the queer film festival circuit, thus partially disrupting the dominant pathways of globalization.

From Kathoey to Renyao

While both the Thai title and the English translation highlight the nickname of the volleyball team ("the iron ladies"), the Cantonese title *Renyao da paiqui* (*Kathoey's Play Volleyball*) deliberately plays up the fact that the volleyball team is made up of kathoey members. *Renyao* (or *Jan-jiu* in Cantonese romanization), used to translate *kathoey* in the film, is a highly contested term in Chinese. The term has a

long semantic history dating as far back as the third century BC, when its usage in philosophical writings denoted “human prodigy” (phenomena of physical anomaly) in contrast with its heavenly counterpart (Zeitlin 1993: 104). Kang Wenqing documents the term’s modern usage during the early twentieth century when its reference to cross-dressing male-to-female *dan* performers in Beijing opera (Kang 2009: 33–39) began to overlap with sexological categories such as “inversion” and “homosexuality” that were emerging in intellectual writings at the time (Kang 2009: 41–59). Scholars and activists who study the term’s contemporary meaning consider its usage to be primarily negative and prefer to translate it as “human freak.” Hans Tao-Ming Huang traces its insulting usage in Taiwan for gay male prostitution during the 1950s–60s, its growing distinction from “homosexuality” in the 1970s, to its contemporary reference to “transsexuality,” particularly transgender entertainers in Southeast Asia (Huang 2011: 53–59). Pui Kei Eleanor Cheung describes its usage in contemporary Hong Kong as “derogatory” (Cheung 2012: 266) but at the same time notes the widespread idolatry kathoey cabarets such as the Bangkok Golden Dome Cabarets inspire when they perform in the city (Cheung 2012: 282n11). TG Garden, a trans activist group in Taiwan, notes, however, that “not all transgender people object to being called *renyao*” and distinguishes between the term’s positive or neutral usage from a negative one (Jiang 2007). The term’s semantic complexity is further compounded by its latter component *yao*. When used as an adjective, *yao* has been reclaimed by gay men to flaunt their flamboyant effeminacy in defiance of what Dennis Lin has called “sissyphobia” in the gay community (Lin 2006). During the 1980s, two of Hong Kong’s most famous semiclosed pop musicians, Roman Tam and Danny Chan, were affectionately nicknamed “*dayao*” (big freak) and “*xiaoyao*” (little freak), respectively. Their fellow singer Anita Mui, whose gender-bending aesthetics were iconic during the 1980s, was also nicknamed “*yaonü*” (freak girl). To complicate things further, *yao* (or *jiu* in Cantonese romanization) as a verb is used as a euphemism for *fuck* (*diu*) in the same way that *fudge* is euphemistically used for *fuck* in English. Queer lyric writer Wyman Wong, who plays Nong/Pak-ji in the dub, plays with all these conflicting shades of meaning in his rewriting of the film’s theme song. The song’s chorus goes like this:

You can “fudge” (*yao*) all you like
 I will sparkle with all my might
 If you accept me, sure that’s cute
 I am as *yao* as can be
 Don’t say I’m too flamboyant
 The problem is with prejudice
 In our hearts we both know it

If *renyao* has often been used as a term of insult in daily life, its use in the film's Cantonese dub is at least highly ambiguous. It may well cause offense, in a similar way that *Transvestites Also Cry* caused offense among those who would prefer "transgender" as a more respectful translation. However, it is precisely in this space between offense and respectability where meanings that exceed established categories are possible. In Cantonese, a literal translation of *transgender*—*kuaxingbie*—exists and is preferred by activists as an umbrella term in the same way *transgender* is used in anglophone contexts: the term distinguishes gender non-conformity clearly from same-sex desire. However, in translating a film like *The Iron Ladies*, the choice of *renyao* over *kuaxingbie* actually serves to keep a plurality of significance in play while retaining (rather than separating, as *transgender/kuaxingbie* would) the entangled affinity between trans and gay subjectivities.

Serhat Ünalı's (2011) study of "kathoeı movies" within the development of queer cinema illustrates its contrast with the trajectory of North American queer cinema. Ruby Rich famously announces that "trans is the new queer" (Rich 2013: 271), thereby placing transgender representation at the forefront of a queer cinema that used to focus on gay and lesbian subjects who are gender normative or whose gender-variant embodiment is understood only through narratives of sexual identity. In contrast, Ünalı points out that in Thai cinema, the distinctive presence of kathoeı is so established that films with kathoeı characters already exist as a recognizable genre (Ünalı 2011: 59). Ünalı also argues that kathoeı movies tend to not differentiate between "gender-normative homosexuality" and transgender subjectivity: even when explicitly representing the former, as *The Iron Ladies* does with the characters of Mon/Sadaki and Nong/Pak-ji, these films would highlight such characters' affinity with femininity, whether expressed as love for fashion and jewelry or for music and dance (66). In reaction to these commonplace representations, independent queer films aspire toward a representation of gayness that is completely distinct from kathoeı, constructing a highly gender-normative form of same-sex desire that eschews any traces of gender nonconformity. Films such as the award-winning *Blissfully Yours* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2002) and *Tropical Malady* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004) or the popular teen romance *Love of Siam* (dir. Chookiat Sakveerakul, 2007) are artistically and commercially successful examples of "gay films" that have resolutely differentiated themselves from the genre of "kathoeı films."

Ünalı characterizes *The Iron Ladies* within this development as the "second wave" (65–71): a mainstream film that replicates the commonplace portrayal of kathoeı's stereotypical effeminacy but does so with more depth and complexity. There is obviously a lot of comedy in *The Iron Ladies*, but the main kathoeı characters provide far more than comic relief and are portrayed

with some degree of nuance and psychological depth. The film also departs from earlier mainstream representations in its unflinchingly positive portrayal of a gender-variant community. It consists of a diverse group of people who, in Western classification, may be recognizable as gay, trans, drag queens, and butch lesbian, but in the film they are not named as such. Dredge Byung'chu Käng has documented with nuance and in great detail the “genderscapes” that are in use in everyday life in Thailand. While academics and activists use specialized terms, Käng observes that “sex, gender, and sexuality” are not differentiated in everyday discourse (Käng 2014: 414–15). Rather than conceiving of these “genderscapes” as non-Western or (more problematically) premodern, Peter Jackson has suggested that they signify “multiple queer modernities” (Jackson 2009: 359–60). In other words, gay and trans cultures that differ from those of the West also differ from their own premodern precursors. They are as much in negotiation with modernity and capitalism as queer and trans models are in the West. Paying attention to translation practices and the irreducible difference between languages can thus also reveal the differential paths of how queer and trans identities are globalized in multiple ways.

Dub the Right Thing

To demonstrate how the film serves as a site of translation and signifies the regional production of trans meanings, I will turn now to a scene in the film to contrast the difference between *The Iron Ladies*' English subtitles in the European version of the film (top line) and the film's Cantonese dub (bottom line). The scene takes place after Pia/Long Po has broken up with her boyfriend and the friends discuss how kathoey is treated by cisgender men:

MON: Look at how beautiful these shoes are. They must cost a fortune.

SADAKO: Look at how handsome Louis Koo [a Cantonese actor] is in the magazine. His sideburn and his rock hard muscles!

PIA: Men are all the same. Who's ever going to really love a transvestite? If you're born a queen, you've got to get what you want while you can.

LONG PO: Men are all assholes. Which one of them would really love a *renyao*? In the end, don't they all end up falling for women? I kept my fidelity all these years, now I just want to screw whoever I want.

JUN: Pia, what the hell are you saying? When you were in love with your boyfriend, it was a completely different story. You said true love was all that mattered. Why have you changed so completely? And I believed everything you said then. I've been waiting for my Prince Charming.

JOEY: Long Po, don't talk so loudly! We sisters are talking about private matters—we can't let others hear. Why don't we speak in Thai? [In heavily accented Thai] You said true love was all that mattered. Why have you changed so completely? And I believed everything you said then. I've been waiting for my Prince Charming.

PIA: There are only Satans in this world!

LONG PO: [in heavily accented Thai] There are only Satans in this world!

JUN: What a change. I cannot keep up with you.

JOEY: [in heavily accented Thai] What a change. I cannot keep up with you.

PIA: I'll tell you one thing. There are no happy endings for gays.

LONG PO: [in heavily accented Thai] I'll tell you one thing. There are no happy endings for kathoeyes.

The English subtitles in the European version, unlike those in the Cantonese release, were translated directly from Thai. The translation stays close to the original dialogues except for *kathoei*, which it inconsistently translates as “transvestites,” “queen,” and “gay.” In contrast, the Cantonese dub is very loose, adding elaborate local references (such as substituting local heartthrob Louis Koo for *shoes*). It even cheekily makes fun of its own translation practice by having Jun/Joey suggest that they switch into Thai and then repeating the original dialogues in heavily accented Thai. However, such reinterpretation and cheeky word play is not extended to the term *kathoei*, which the Cantonese dub consistently renders into *renyao*, and in so doing retains both terms' ambiguity and nondifferentiation between gay/trans subjectivities.

In a study of how the terms *lesbi* and *gay* circulate in Indonesia through mass media and enter into negotiation with various local categories of gender and sexual variance, Tom Boellstorff uses dubbing as a metaphor for the complex process through which non-Western subjects “take on” globalized categories of identity through “overwriting” Western subject positions. It is not a top-down imposition from the West, nor is it an act of complete agency. Rather, like the practice of dubbing, it involves displacing a source language but strictly within the signification of a prewritten script. Boellstorff sees the practice of dubbing as a “productively partial incorporation of the self into discourse,” a “holding together of two ostensibly incompatible cultural logics without conflating them [where] a space for subjectivity appears” (Boellstorff 2003: 237).

The literal dubbing practice performed on *The Iron Ladies* illustrates Boellstorff's metaphor quite aptly. Instead of overwriting Western subject positions, however, the Cantonese dub performs an inter-Asian collage that holds together fragments from two parallel, alternative queer/trans modernities that continue to

be in negotiation with their anglophone counterparts. It represents a regional translation practice that is too often overlooked in the analysis of global/local encounters. It shows a different way out in contexts in which transgender may—or perhaps must—fail, a failure that, as A. Finn Enke suggests, “incites creative elaboration, the proliferation of stories . . . and begs that we continuously translate *from* transgender” (Enke 2014: 243).

Coda: Always in Translation

In marked contrast to the ambivalent reception of *Transvestites Also Cry* I described at the beginning of the article, the audience response to *Drunktown's Finest* (dir. Sydney Freeland, 2014) at Vancouver's Queer Film Festival had been rapturous, garnering the filmmaker a long standing ovation.² At a panel discussion held after the screening of her film, Sydney Freeland was inundated with questions about how she was able to bring such “authenticity” to the film, which tells interwoven stories of three Navajo young people navigating life on and off their reserve in New Mexico. One of the characters identifies as trans but, during the course of the narrative, learns about the *nádleehí*, a socially accepted role for gender-variant individuals that has long existed in Navajo history. Freeland spoke movingly about how the story paralleled her own journey as a trans-identified Navajo who, like Felixia, learned about this history and saw it as a different path for being trans. Freeland emphasized the importance of casting Carmen Moore, a Navajo actress who is also a trans woman, to ensure that the role would be played with integrity. At this point, however, perhaps made uneasy by the audience's repeated emphasis on how “real” they found the film, Freeland suddenly reeled in the discussion and reminded the audience that *Drunktown's Finest* is a fiction film after all. Freeland pointed out that the long story Felixia hears about the *nádleehí* from her grandfather is delivered in English because Richard Ray Witman, the actor who plays Felixia's grandfather, is a Yuchi from the Muscogee Creek Nation and does not have facility in Navajo to deliver such a long monologue.

Freeland's disruption of the audience's desire for an “authentic” rendition of Navajo knowledge through her film is an interesting reversal of the scene of offense at the screening of *Transvestites Also Cry*. As I show in my discussion of the potentially offensive use of *renyao* for *kathoey* in the dubbing of *The Iron Ladies*, attending to the space between offense and respectability in translation practice often illuminates what has become obscured by or lost between established categories of trans subjectivities. In contrast, the audience's too-ready celebration of Freeland's success in translating *nádleehí* subjectivity on-screen glosses over the very history of colonial erasure of indigenous knowledge that renders *nádleehí* unintelligible in English in the first place. Freeland's deliberate emphasis of the “translatedness” of what she has presented on-screen is a good reminder that we

forget the necessity for, as well as the necessary imperfection of, translation at our own peril. The knowledge represented by the *nádleehee* comes to the film's audience already translated, of which Freeland reminds her audience by pointing out that they literally learn about it in English, in translation. This is a lesson well worth remembering as we ponder how trans knowledge moves locally, regionally, and globally, whether in monolingual or multilingual contexts.

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Notes

1. The screening took place on May 22, 2009, at De Balie, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Details of the screening are available at Netherlands Transgender Film Festival (2009).
2. The screening took place on August 17, 2014, at Cineplex Odeon International Village in Vancouver. The panel discussion "New Frontiers in Film" was held on August 18, 2014, at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

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Appendix

Table 1. Film titles

| <i>Original title</i> | <i>Romanization of original title</i> | <i>English translation of original title</i> | <i>Chinese translation of title</i> | <i>Pinyin romanization of Chinese title</i> | <i>English translation of Chinese title</i> |
|------------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| サインはV | <i>Sain wa V</i> | V Is for Victory | 青春火花 | Qingchun huohua | Sparkles of youth |
| 燃えろアタック | <i>Moero atakku</i> | Burning Youth | 排球女將 | Paiqiu nūjiang | Volleyball women warriors |
| リング | <i>Ringu</i> | The Ring | 午夜凶鈴 | Wuye xiongling | Evil ring at midnight |
| สตรีเหล็ก | <i>Satree lek</i> | The Iron Ladies | 人妖打排球 | Ren Yao da paiqiu | Kathoeys play volleyball |
| สตรีเหล็ก ดับโลกแตก | <i>Satree lek tob lo taek</i> | Iron Ladies Roar! | 人妖打排球 之鐵女漢拍 碎地球 | Ren Yao da paijiu zhi tie nūhan paisui diqu | Kathoeys play volleyball: Iron ladies smash the world |
| นางนาก | <i>Nang nak</i> | Ghost Wife | 鬼妻 | Guiqi | Ghost wife |

Table 2. Terms

| | |
|------------|-------|
| Kathoeys | กะเทย |
| Ren Yao | 人妖 |
| Kuaxingbie | 跨性別 |