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Lim, Bliss Cua

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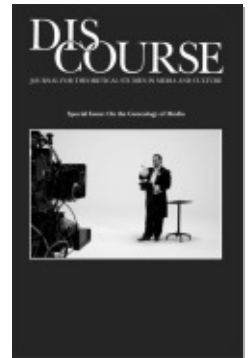
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## **Introduction: The Embodied Afterlives of Translation**

Bliss Cua Lim

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# Introduction: The Embodied Afterlives of Translation

Bliss Cua Lim

Translation is usually understood as a mimetic transaction between the language of the original and another language into which meaning is reproduced, transposed, or approximated. Although the classical formulation of translation alludes to “sameness of meaning,” “almost inevitably,” John Sallis observes, “translation goes astray.” Translation aims at approximation, if not replication, yet in transposing one meaning onto another set of coordinates, “it cannot but breach the sameness in the foray that must be made into alterity, for instance, into the alterity of another language.” In attempting to ford difference in the service of legibility, however, translation itself becomes vulnerable to what Sallis calls the “excessive drift of the sense of translation”:

Once translation is extended to cover the very operation of signification as such, it will contaminate, as it were, whatever is bound to discourse. On the other hand, one may, with some legitimacy no doubt, insist on limiting the drift of translation, on restricting the sense of the word such that it applies only to certain linkages between signifiers in different languages and perhaps also between signifiers in a single language.<sup>1</sup>

In emphasizing the “excessive *drift* of the sense of translation,” Sallis is acknowledging the conventionally narrow yet potentially limitless scope of the concept. Translation may contract to circumscribe “only certain linkages between signifiers in different

languages” or expand to become coextensive with signification itself: “as such, it will contaminate, as it were, whatever is bound to discourse.”

The essays in this special issue stage a productive surrender to this sense of translation as intractable drift, a way of naming and approaching the crosscurrents of cultural discourses whose effects and afterlives can be managed but never fully foreclosed as they move across conflicted, differential fields. In addition to this sense of being carried along a spatial trajectory, *drift* by definition refers also to “a deviation from a true reproduction, representation, or reading.” The term also allows, so my dictionary tells me, another, lesser-known sense of the term: drift as “something driven down upon or forced onto a body,”<sup>2</sup> provocatively encapsulating questions of coercion and corporeality in translations conducted under asymmetrical or inequitable conditions (what Talal Asad calls “forcible translation,” explored later here).

This special issue brings together interdisciplinary scholarship by young feminist scholars working on Asian film and media from a variety of nationally inscribed and transnationally imbricated perspectives. Four of the six essays gathered here focus on Southeast Asian film and media—contemporary Philippine cinema, Burmese transnational media, 1990s Thai *sakon* cinema, and Vietnamese diasporic filmmaking—areas that remain profoundly underresearched in the discipline of Film and Media studies. Two of the essays attest to the new market proximities enabled by globalized neoliberal economies: the transnational uptake of a South Korean media celebrity, on the one hand, and of a Hong Kong martial arts genre, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Though each case study is singular, the interdisciplinary textual, cultural, political, and industrial critiques of the various scholars assembled in this issue are thematically interrelated and cohesive, which makes the breadth and variation of their contributions all the more exciting. Read together, the essays in this issue affirm the inherent “errancy” of translations, their tendency to wander from or undermine the uses to which they are put.<sup>4</sup> These critiques share the conviction that translations are possessed not only of inordinate drift but also of intractable errancy, especially when the site of translation is not confined to language but opens to the irreducible specificities of bodies at the coordinates of gender, sexuality, nation, class, race, cultural and economic policy, spiritual belief, technical history, and generation. In framing the drift of translation as embodied drift, several of the essays demonstrate what happens when body and transformational reinscription are deployed together. What happens when translative operations are

emplotted onto bodies themselves? Unexpected forms of knowledge, profitability, and pleasure, with their accompanying residues, excesses, and elisions, are produced when appropriations, borrowings, adaptations, and repurposings among screen texts are sited on highly particularized bodies.

In a Foucauldian epistemological movement, embodiment is lived as a *productive constraint*. On the one hand, the body is the enabling condition, the prior corporealized forestructure that grounds our very experience of social relationality. On the other, embodiment is itself produced by the social and markedly inflected by cultural mis/translations. The variegated essays in this issue tease out the resonances of embodied translations on the agentive personhood of Vietnamese diasporic women as collaborative storytellers; on the alluring-yet-decaying body of a legendary Thai female ghost; on a South Korean transsexual model commodified as brand icon; on Burmese transgendered ritualists who exceed a secular U.S.-based LGBT lens; on a New Zealand stunt performer whose body inherits techniques of bodily display rooted in Hong Kong cinema; and on the racialized star embodiment of a brown-identified Filipino film superstar as translated and appropriated by her elite mestiza successor.

In addition to the issue's overarching themes, four recurring concerns are refracted differently across each author's scholarly prisms: first, contested heteropatriarchal nationalist forms of translation that take aim at female bodies (see the essays by Duong and Fuhrmann); second, fissured neoliberal appropriations of female and transgendered embodiment in the wake of the 1997 Asian economic crisis (the Fuhrmann and Ahn essays); third, the costs and perils of translating racialized transgendered subjectivities into the terms of U.S.-based LGBT/queer narratives (the Ahn and Ho essays); and lastly, star embodiment as a film-industrial rubric, allowing both appropriations within a single national cinema and transnational generic exchange between geographically distinct film and television industries (the Lim and Steimer essays).

Bringing questions of translation and embodiment to bear on trans/national Asian film and media cannot be confined to the commonplace translative processes noted in passing by English-language scholarship on foreign national cinemas; for example, translating film titles and dialogue or the politics of subtitling or remaking. In the essay that opens this issue, considerations of translation serve to dislodge narrowly auteurist approaches while also shedding light on the ways in which filmmakers might be willful mistranslators of their own work, speaking over the heads of monoglot audiences to address multilingual cultural insiders.

In “Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*,” Lan Duong reads filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha as a treasonous translator who betrays the generic conventions of the ethnographic documentary and knowingly deploys subtitles that exacerbate, rather than ease, problems of cross-cultural unintelligibility. Trinh undermines the translational ideal of identitarian filmmaking as transparently “giving voice” to a woman of color speaking in a foreign tongue or in heavily accented English. While remaining deeply attentive to Trinh’s ironizing tactics, Duong’s essay also challenges narrowly auteurist readings of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* in favor of a consideration of collective “agentive” storytelling by Vietnamese diasporic women in the second half of the film. Duong argues that the film’s focus on collective female storytelling resists heteropatriarchal interpellations of the Vietnamese woman’s role in nation building: “[T]he women themselves betray the notion that female subjectivity can only be premised on serving the nation” (Duong, in this issue, 198). Duong’s piece is an important scholarly intervention on a film that has been discussed primarily in a monolingual vein, an approach that has resulted in criticisms regarding the purported incomprehensibility, self-enclosure, and intellectual rarefaction of Trinh’s film. Duong’s essay demonstrates that, to the attentive eyes and ears of a polyglot spectator—a cultural insider awake to *Surname Viet’s* dynamic of il/legibility and allusion, its sly puns, and its play of French, English, and regional Vietnamese languages—the film is rich with meaning for select audiences while perhaps remaining deliberately opaque to others.

In a famous essay, “The Concept Of Cultural Translation In British Social Anthropology,” Talal Asad noted that the “transforming power” of cultural translation does not operate on an even playing field. What Asad terms the “inequality of languages and modes of life” constitutes the asymmetrically structured terrains across which translations drift. Asad warns that weaker languages and modes of life are “more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around.”<sup>5</sup> This idea of forcible translation is a particularly rich thematic explored by the next three essays in this issue.

“All successful translation,” Asad points out, “is addressed . . . to a specific set of practices, a specific form of life.”<sup>6</sup> The essays by Arnika Fuhrmann and Patty Jeehyun Ahn follow the conflicted trajectories of embodied translations under neoliberal conditions of life, registering the aftereffects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis as the context for ideological fissures in cinema and television.

In “*Nang Nak*—Ghost Wife: Love, Sufficiency, and Buddhist Melancholia in Nonzee Nimibutr’s Thai Ghost Film,” Arnika Fuhrmann reads Nonzee’s filmic treatment of a legendary female ghost as a legitimizing translation in the service of statist sexual politics. Fuhrmann’s erudite study asserts that Nonzee recasts the ghost legend’s emphasis on female sexual voracity into a Buddhist genre of stories in which the female body serves as an object lesson for the futility of carnal desire. This domesticating translation served the ends of neoliberal state policies of “sufficiency” that aimed to defend Thailand from further economic and social stresses in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The government-espoused “sufficiency policy” (Fuhrmann, in this issue, 224) applied to sectors of the economy but also came to designate social and moral principles meant to secure the country’s reentry into global competitiveness. In practice, the cultural policies of the sufficiency economy made high demands on women: sexual moderation and a policing of public femininity in the name of a Theravadin Buddhist-inflected form of Thai nationalism. A temporally incongruous, neotraditional rhetoric of virtuous Thai femininity and heteronormativity underwrites *Nang Nak*, but Nonzee’s film, Fuhrmann argues, is not a lossless translation. Despite the film’s attempt to recast the Thai ghost wife’s sexuality into a familial, monogamous mold, the spectatorial pleasures encouraged by the film’s eroticized display of bodies in “heritage bodies” ultimately backfired, undermining the Buddhist pedagogy of detachment and contravening conservative social policy. Fuhrmann argues that the “refurbished Thai nationalism” of the 1990s was literally emplotted on a temporally disjunctive bodily ideal, that of the “new-traditional Thai femininity” (Fuhrmann, in this issue, 224, 230), which *Nak* only partially typified. *Nak*’s sympathetic, sexually vibrant desires are never entirely occluded by the film’s emphasis on a Buddhist pedagogy of detachment. “Cracks in the fantasy” of *Nang Nak* demonstrate that the demand for “bodies and identities that are traditional in character but transnational in their implications for the national economic and cultural future” is unsupportable: “Ultimately, we can read the nonsustainability of the ghostly fantasy also to mark the untenability of current official notions of sexual difference in Thailand” (Fuhrmann, in this issue, 222, 242).

The consequences of neoliberalism’s sexual-cultural politics of pragmatism and the screen effects of a “post-IMF crisis logic of national reinvention” (Ahn, in this issue, 263–64) are explored from a different perspective in Patty Jeehyun Ahn’s “Harisu: South

Korean Cosmetic Media and the Paradox of Transgendered Neoliberal Embodiment.” Ahn offers an analysis of how a little-known male-to-female transgendered model became the television spokesperson for a South Korean cosmetics firm. As Ahn demonstrates, corporate branding through Harisu’s sexual narrative is a response to a South Korean economic crisis prompted in part by the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This post-IMF corporate branding paradoxically resulted in a transgendered neoliberal embodiment of traditional notions of Korean feminine beauty. Harisu’s body is a racialized figuration that helps brand particular companies and national industries in South Korea as cutting edge, thus translating or recoding transgendered embodiment as brand value. Ahn’s analysis of the translative processes surrounding Harisu centers on two sets of texts: DoDo’s televised Palgantong commercial, which depends on a biologizing narrative containment of the transgendered performer, and American press coverage of Harisu as representative of *hallyu* (Korean Wave), a horizon of taste and consumption practices comprising the transnational market for Korean cultural goods. In the nationally circulated television advertisement, as well as the overseas reception of Harisu among mainstream and diasporic audiences in the United States, Harisu’s embodiment is subjected to two translative operations: first, “the recoding of her transgender identity into a brand iconography within Korean beauty culture”; and, second, an assimilative reading of Harisu “characterized by neoliberal logics of choice, exception, and progress that are at once linked to Western configurations of queer and feminist identity, yet cannot be restricted to them” (Ahn, in this issue, 251).

The mis/translations and recuperations of racialized transgendered embodiment in non-Euro-American contexts is a concern shared by Tamara C. Ho’s “Transgender, Transgression, and Translation: A Cartography of *Nat Kadaws*—Notes on Gender and Sexuality within the Spirit Cult of Burma.” Ho offers a textured analysis of recent filmic and literary representations of the flamboyant *nat* spirit cult in Burma: the documentary *Friends in High Places*, the feature film *The Legend of Lady Hill*, and the novel *Smile as They Bow*. That the body can be a site of translation, a medium of conversion between worlds, is made explicit in the figure of the *nat kadaw* or spirit medium, who not only negotiates between human and supernatural worlds but also intervenes between the powerful (deities) and the powerless (their devotees). Embodiment and language, Ho’s study suggest, are tensely intertwined. As representations of *nat kadaws* circulate in gay and lesbian film festivals outside Burma, the “discursive incorporation of *nat kadaws* into globalized



discourses of queer/LGBT . . . sexuality, agency, and transgression” (Ho, in this issue, 274) ends by obfuscating the multifarious identifications embraced by Burmese shamans themselves: “[T]he variegated vocabulary surrounding nat mediums, gender (roles), and sexuality in Burma is too often lost in translation: not all Burmese nat kadaws are male, nor are the male-bodied nat kadaws all necessarily ‘gay’ or ‘(drag) queens’ in the Western sense” (Ho, in this issue, 274). In her analysis of novelistic and cinematic representations of nat worship, Ho uncovers a “collective memory of historical heterodoxy and assaults on the minor, the feminine, the foreign, or the subordinated” (Ho, in this issue, 277) that fuels the radical, refractory longings of minor subjectivities. By considering how female and male transgenderism in nat worship are rendered in translation, Ho illuminates a host of power effects that accrue to words: the scholarly terms *acault* and *achauk* foreground male transgenderism in the nat cult at the cost of eliding female-bodied nat kadaws, while *meinmasha*, a term many contemporary male nat kadaws use to refer to themselves, underscores by contrast “the sense of an affinity to femininity” (Ho, in this issue, 289). As Ho persuasively demonstrates, the stakes of translating embodiment can be high: the hypervisibility of the gay male transgendered ritualist may contribute to an erasure of female mediumship. The works that Ho analyses provide a much-needed counterweight to the mimetic capital of “Orientalist, androcentric, and decontextualized mistranslations” (Ho, in this issue, 298).

The last two essays of the special issue focus on translation in relation to star embodiment. My essay, “Sharon’s Noranian Turn: Stardom, Embodiment, and Language in Philippine Cinema,” revisits the star personae of Nora Aunor and Sharon Cuneta, arguably the two most important female stars of Filipino cinema in the post-studio period. My analysis of their films and their star texts at the decisive moments of their explosion into national popularity in the late 1960s (for Nora Aunor) and the early 1980s (for Sharon Cuneta) considers the dovetailing of racialized star embodiment and language as markers of social distinction.

In Philippine popular cinema, star embodiment has historically meant mestizo/a embodiment, since the social location of the mestizo/a is imagined as proximate to the privilege of Spanish and American colonizers, the postcolonial elite, and the physical appearance of Hollywood stars. In the studio era, carefully crafted star personae for light-skinned, mixed-race actors with European features emphasized two modes of translation: imitation and indigenization. By the late 1960s, however, mestiza stardom was challenged by the ascendancy of Nora Aunor, who rose to national

fame through an amateur singing contest. In this essay, I conceptualize Noranian embodiment as “a film-historically significant, oppositional form of valuation . . . Nora's body defied a racialized politics of casting that enshrined tall, fair-skinned mestizo/a performers as the apex of physical beauty and cinematic glamour” (Lim, in this issue, 322).

In the 1980s, Sharon Cuneta, Nora's “successor in popularity,” sought to translate and embody the populist, brown-identified appeal of Nora Aunor in reconstrued mestiza form. This translative refashioning, which I call Sharon's “Norian turn,” points to important shifts in the logics of mestizo envy and white love<sup>7</sup> in Philippine cinema and transforms the nationalizing function of popular Filipino film, a nationalizing function grounded in language. My essay embeds the consideration of these two stars in the language wars contemporaneous with their ascent to popularity. It also pursues the implications of both actresses' crossover star personae for challenging monolithic conceptions of linguistically distinct, class-segregated audiences in popular Filipino cinema.

The last essay in this special issue takes up the question of star embodiment in relation to transnational generic exchange. In “From *Wuxia* to *Xena*: Translation and the Body Spectacle of Zoë Bell,” Lauren Steimer offers a highly original consideration of the “body spectacles” featured in overseas-produced American television shows. Her specific case study involves the historical and generic debts of *Xena*, a New Zealand production aired on U.S. television, to the Hong Kong female martial arts film, or *wuxia*. The transnational trajectories of embodied translations come through very clearly in Steimer's terminology. What she calls “Kiwi-style ‘wire fu’” refers to wirework stunts modeled after Hong Kong action spectacles as approximated by New Zealand film crews, without input from Hong Kong martial arts choreographers or stunt technicians. *Kiwi-style wire fu* amounts to the translation of embodied visual effects across nationally circumscribed film industries and audiences, a “communicative translation” aimed at mimicking the spectatorial effects of *wuxia*'s body spectacles. Steimer theorizes *body spectacles* as central to the definition of martial arts genres, as well as premised on the corporeal skill of the star-laborer: “Body spectacles are generated and constituted by the laboring body of a virtuoso performer skilled in deftly choreographed corporeal manipulation” (Steimer, in this issue, 361). The *star-laborer*, in Steimer's conceptualization, is also an embodiment of technical/national/generic film historicity: “[T]he star-laborer . . . captures the determining influence exerted by body spectacle on the

selfsame performer's star image. . . . Technical histories of bodily practices congeal in the laboring body of the star" (Steimer, in this issue, 362). Focusing in particular on the body of female stunting star Zoë Bell, the actress who served as the stunt double for the female protagonist of *Xena*, Steimer argues that the body spectacle of Bell is a kind of embodied translation, since her body reveals that historical practices, body disciplines, and performance styles associated with one national genre (Hong Kong's wuxia) have been spectacularly refigured for another (Hollywood action genres shot overseas).

In closing, I want to suggest that translation names not so much an operation performed upon texts as a relationship of temporalized kinship forged between the "original" and the texts, practices, and embodiments that "succeed" it.<sup>8</sup> For Walter Benjamin,

a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks a stage of their continued life.<sup>9</sup>

Though, for Benjamin, translation referred primarily to the relationship between languages, for those of us for whom translation drifts away from the purely verbal sign to the messy realms of bodies, practices, and film-industrial exchanges, Benjamin's insight into the many afterlives of translation holds true. Every translation has an afterlife, just as translations themselves ensue from the precursors to which they are bound and whose lives and effects they continue and renew. The essays in this issue all engage, in very different ways, the power effects of embodied translations that resonate beyond their own moment, sounding the relationship of likeness to alterity in unforeseeable and contested ways.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), xi, 2–3.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. "Drift."

<sup>3</sup> For a nuanced account of market proximities between Asian regional and global cultural industries and audiences under neoliberal tactics of flexible accumulation in film industries, see Yeh Yueh-Yu and Darrell William Davis, "Japan Hong-screen: Pan-Asian Cinemas and Flexible Accumulation," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 22, no. 1 (2002): 61–82.

<sup>4</sup> Sallis, *On Translation*, xi.

<sup>5</sup>Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, School of American Research Advanced Seminar series (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 141–64, quotations on 157–58.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>7</sup>See Vicente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>At the same time, in renewing a precursor text and helping to assure its cultural longevity, the temporality of translation may actually complicate or undermine the "temporality of afterward." What I have argued with regard to remakes can, I think, also apply to the nonlinear temporality of translation:

[T]he sequel or remake is thought to always follow from a precursor text. Yet this "post"-temporality, as with the premise of originality, proves upon closer view to be illusory. The time of afterward starts to come apart the closer one looks at things, since intertextuality is itself always temporally discrepant, . . . a juxtaposition of discourses from diverse eras. (Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, The Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009], 220–21)

<sup>9</sup>Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*" (1955), trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 83–109, quotation on 71.