Beyond Equivalence: Translation, Sexuality, and the Politics of Meaning Reading *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Sexuality*

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Reviewed by ANITTA JIA

The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Sexuality presents itself at a time when disciplinary boundaries are theoretically dissolving yet practically hardening. Emphatic in its advocacy for interdisciplinary inquiry, this handbook, edited by Brian James Baer and Serena Bassi, perceives, challenges, and critically analyses conventions and deflections in Translation Studies through the lens of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. This compilation not only invites TS to intentionally complicate institutionalised, Western-centric gender vocabularies, but also explores its capacity to interrogate global, de-centred sexual epistemologies through the productive friction of non-equivalence. The unconventional pairing of gender and translation, both nuanced disciplines within the wider Humanities and Social Sciences spectrum, is elaborated across the volume to unsettle hierarchies that have historically privileged empirical over theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, the handbook serves as a call for a radical rethinking of how translation and sexuality might be considered as mutually disruptive, co-constitutive fields of inquiry.

This volume steps away from homogenising the fields of gender studies and translation studies into simplified binaries such as "queering translation" or "translating queerness" (Baer & Bassi, 5). Instead, it critiques the very language used to define disciplinary boundaries, drawing attention to the ideological weight behind translatory choices. Published in 2024, this handbook carries twenty-six chapters divided into two parts: Key Concepts, which establish theoretical reflections on the intersections of TS and WGSS, and Case Studies, which include empirical analyses of texts ranging from Chinese erotica and the *Kama Sutra* to queer theory in German and

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transfeminist activism in Hispanophone contexts. Fundamentally, I perceived this handbook as a postcolonial advocacy that ties the denaturalising norm within Queer Studies that calls for historicising, provincialising, and de-essentialising sexual knowledge and power to the reordering capacity of translations that refrain from any kind of normalisation. The handbook's foundation on queer theory's principles, particularly the destabilisation of identity categories, aims to move beyond fixed notions of sexual orientation, advocating for a fluid, relational understanding of sexualities that translation can illuminate.

Translation Across Borders: Queer Vocabulary and Cultural Reinscription

In one of the chapters titled "Translation and Bordering", Sergey Tyulenev conceptualises translation as a unifying force that operates across and beyond borders. Drawing on examples from the Russian homosexual subculture, he aligns with Baer in viewing translation as a powerful mechanism that pluralises Western interpretations of homosexuality and critiques the universalist assumptions of the minoritarian (gay) model by provincialising it (22). Tyulenev extends Baer's arguments into the realm of Russian social media, using the platform xgay.ru, a popular online forum for Russian-speaking queer individuals engaging with global LGBTQIA+ discourses, as a case study. Translation becomes central to the very discourse unfolding on such platforms, reinforcing its influence in shaping queer representation in digital spaces.

Tyulenev also examines the influx of anglicisms into Russian queer subcultures, despite ongoing cultural tensions. The lack of native Russian terms for concepts like "coming out" results in transliterated expressions such as "каминг-аут" (kaming-aut) (20). For Tyulenev, this linguistic borrowing not only signals the influence of global queer discourse but also raises concerns about how the minoritarian gay identity is normalised, often positioning it in binary opposition to heteronormative masculinity. These dynamics are not unique to Russia but resonate across various non-Western contexts grappling with similar cultural translations of queerness. Robert Gillett's "Translating Queer Theory: The German

Context" is an extension of Tyulenev's reading. While the acceptance of English-language queer theory by German academia offered new frameworks for thinking about gender and sexuality, some scholars critiqued it for being culturally alien and linguistically invasive. Transliteration of words like "coming out" and "closet" into German (*ungeroutet* and *Schrankschwuler*) was criticised for its linguistic awkwardness, Gillett recalls (175). The overarching acceptance of queer theory's Eurocentric language in recent times has led to the creation of hybrid queer spectra around the world, and German is no exception. With the growing popularity of US-based education in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the academic generational shift of current times has begun to co-opt and limit indigenous experiences and sexual deviances within Anglo-American frameworks. Adding to this chain of thought, I could not help but refer to the Hijra community in India, whose narratives do not neatly map onto Western queer or trans categories in detached translations. In addition to fictional representations, several non-fictional translations, such as NGO reports and human rights articles, have reduced Hijra identity to "transgender woman," thereby flattening centuries of non-Western gender ontology into Western trans frameworks.

These tensions between linguistic borrowing and cultural misrepresentation are not limited to queer terminology alone but extend to literary and visual representations of gendered identities. I believe Haruka Ogawa's case study titled "Translating Geisha: Japanese Women in Post-War Translations" in this volume also extends Tyulenev's perspectives. Citing examples such as Edward Seidensticker's *Snow Country* and the widely popular *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, Ogawa critiques the over-sexualisation of geishas and Japanese women in English translations that reinforce Orientalist stereotypes. Geisha characters in English-language versions of Japanese literature are often stripped of agency and nuance. Paratextual elements, such as covers and translator's notes, often reimpose exotic Western fantasies of the implicitly sexualised and disposable geisha (148). Ogawa emphasises that translators are not neutral conduits but active agents, illustrating how various Japanese editions of *Memoirs of a Geisha* have undergone paratextual evolution, some retaining exotic appeal, while others

attempt to de-sexualise the character through choices like featuring embroidered kimonos on the cover. On a similar note, when Nalini Jameela's Malayalam book titled *Oru Lyngikathozhilaliyude Atmakatha* was translated as *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by J. Devika, several readings emerged about the translation's misplaced treatment of eroticism, starting with its cover image. Kavyashree R. critiqued the misrepresentation of Jameela's subjective agency in the translation of this book, emphasising the sensationalised or marketable portrayal aimed at eliciting curiosity and catering to an Orientalising gaze (151).

Translation as Filtering: Censorship, Erotics, and Representation

In "Translation and Censorship", Baer explores the enduring presence of censorship across cultures and histories, drawing a compelling parallel between censorship and translation as both being practices that mediate or restrict meaning. What stood out most to me was Baer's framing with reference to Carol O'Sullivan and Michael Holquist of both practices as reflective of a society's ideological structures at a given moment. This led me to recall how the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) faced censorship in the Indian subcontinent a little before, during, and after gaining independence, especially in translation. While vernacular texts like *Lihaaf* (1942) or *Thanda Gosht* (1950) circulated within niche literary circles, their translations into English or other regional languages raised deeper anxieties due to their broader reach. Baer's analysis of how censored texts persist over time resonates with the case of *Angarey* (1932), a controversial short story collection, whose 2014 translation reignited debates about religion and morality. He highlights long-standing censorship evasion strategies—allegory, coding, and meta-textual tactics like self-publishing (*samizdat*) or publishing abroad (*tamizdat*)—which I believe have gained traction in spaces like India. Crucially, Baer suggests that censorship is evolving from a reactive mechanism to a pre-emptive filter, complicating how we map its political geographies. Still, he ends with optimism: translation has historically outlived censorship, and in the digital age, it continues to do so (43).

I read Zohar Weiman-Kelman's case study titled "Translating Minority: Yiddish Deviance in Translation" in close dialogue with Baer's explorations. One of the central concerns in this chapter is the Yiddish translations of early sexological texts such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. While the original versions of these texts refer explicitly to homosexuality, masturbation, female desire, and "unusual sex," their Yiddish translations often resort to euphemisms to describe such subjects (196). Here, censorship operates at cultural, religious, and communal levels. This can be read in multiple ways. On one hand, the absence of terminological precision reflects a form of soft censorship, signalling what was publishable or tolerable within Yiddish-speaking communities. On the other, this very ambiguity offers a paradoxical form of preservation, allowing deviant sexualities to remain present, though obscured, by encoding queer knowledge (if one may call it that) in plain sight through euphemism, omission, and linguistic indirection. "Translating Pornography: The Case of Henriette Doucé" by Colette Colligan in this volume also addresses how meanings are filtered when pornographic texts are translated, thereby altering history.

If censorship governs what can be said, Michelle Woods pushes us to reconsider how meaning is felt. Woods' "Translation and Eroticism" follows Baer's reflections on censorship with a compelling reimagining of translation as an intimate, queer, and sensual act. In one of my favourite chapters in this handbook, Woods dismantles traditional metaphors like fidelity and betrayal, framing translation instead as desire, play, and resistance. Drawing from Roland Barthes' concept of "writing aloud," she presents translation as a bodily experience, where the tongue functions as both linguistic and sexual organ, filled with hesitation, pleasure, and affective engagement. Referencing Aarón Lacayo and Luce Irigaray, Woods defines translation as "an ever-unfolding space of becoming," embracing ambiguity over fixed meaning (49). This perspective queers translation by liberating it from rule-bound fidelity and instead grounds it in caress, empathy, and vulnerability, inspired by Spivak, Barthes, and Sontag. Woods' most powerful intervention, I believe, lies in her analysis of Kafka's erotic correspondence with Milena Jesenská. She reframes their exchange as linguistic erotics, where Kafka eroticises Milena's interpretive

agency: "Kafka praises the fidelity of Milena's translations, while simultaneously destabilising the very notion of fidelity" (68). Her discussion of Milan Kundera's notion of "sodonymisation" further exposes how translation is often framed within heteropatriarchal logics of domination, where the author is male and sovereign, and the translator is feminised and passive (57). The expectation of a "good" translator as faithful and invisible, and the suspicion cast on interpretive agency, reveals a persistent gendered conundrum at the heart of translation practice.

The tensions between eroticisation and distortion are further explored in cross-cultural translations of Asian texts. Lintao Qi, in "Translating Chinese Erotica: Re-Inventing Otherness", argues that translations of Chinese erotic texts often tend to reflect the socio-cultural and political climates of their target cultures more than the Chinese "other" they claim to represent. Qi identifies four modes through which this "otherness" is (re)produced: **Linguistic Otherness** emerges through literal translations that over-eroticize metaphors and indirect translations that distort original meanings; **Typographical Otherness** inflates a text's eroticism by inserting untranslated or foreign-language passages to evade censorship, similar to the Japanese versions where Chinese segments are often left untouched and their context is often relegated to footnotes; **Pictorial Otherness** arises from misrepresentations of Chinese culture in illustrations, often blending generic Oriental elements, sometimes even by Japanese publishers (an instance of Internal Orientalism); and finally, **Narrative Otherness** is produced when translations prioritise market appeal over fidelity to the source text, resulting in hyper-sexualised adaptations (128-136). Qi also underscores that the boundary between erotica and pornography is fluid, especially in the realm of translation, echoing Ogawa's observations in a different cultural context. The case of *Jin Ping Mei* is a classic example, as it is often misread as pornographic despite having minimal explicit content. It illustrates how reader reception, not textual intent, governs such classifications in the West.

The chapter by Clorinda Donato titled "Translating Libertinage: The Sexual Epistemologies of Diderot's *Indiscreet Jewels*" also resonates with Woods' framing of translation as embodied, sensual,

and affective (66-70). Donato dissects Diderot's *Indiscreet Jewels* to present translation as a site of affect rather than a monotonous transfer of knowledge about sexuality. Reflecting upon the Enlightenment-era Orientalism, Donato records that Diderot's placement of erotic storytelling in non-European settings made the text a safer space to stage taboo sexual knowledge. Donato also interrogates the use of multilingualism and eroticism as epistemological tools in this chapter. It shows how Enlightenment libertine fiction promotes sexual knowledge through transgressive and multilingual narratives. Donato's chapter can be read as an earlier historical articulation of this erotic and affective understanding of translation.

This embodied turn in translation is further theorised by Douglas Robinson's chapter "Translation and Somatics", where translation is reimagined not as a mechanical transfer of meaning but as an embodied, affective, and neurologically shaped experience. Using a four-level somatic model, Robinson challenges the assumptions around what feels "natural" in both translation and gender. Just as the normalisation of binary essentialism has long been perceived as innate, so too has translational equivalence been accepted as a neutral standard. Yet both, he argues, are neurologically imprinted and culturally reinforced. On the individual level, **somatic markers** shape our instinctive responses to norms; **somatic mimesis** explains how we mirror the emotions and judgments of those we feel aligned with; **somatic exchange** captures how affective feedback from groups influences our sense of what's acceptable; and **icosis** shows how repeated communal validation can turn subjective opinions into perceived truths (110–114). His coinage "equivalencefuck" (118) offers a queering of translation's obsession with sameness, opening up space for interpretive disruption. In many ways, Robinson's vision resonates with Woods' ideas, both grounding translation in the body, in pleasure, in resistance. Ultimately, Robinson roots translation within the nervous system and the affective landscapes of social life, arguing that it, like identity, is fluid and always in motion, always becoming (123). In doing so, he stays deeply committed to this volume's purpose: to liberate TS from its rigid structures and move the conversation from simply *translating sexuality* to thinking *with and through* sexuality. I believe this

chapter would have been better positioned consecutively after Woods' to benefit the flow of thoughts.

Translation, Normativity, and the Politics of Becoming

Vojko Gorjanc's chapter "Translation and Normativity" tackles a central concern in TS, the reinforcement of normative language systems. He highlights the significant role vernacular translations play in shaping worldviews, especially when works from smaller linguistic communities like Slovenia are translated into global languages such as English. These translations, along with translators' prefaces and editorial framing, possess the power to shape lexical entries and, by extension, influence cultural perceptions (89). Babli Moitra Saraf and Corine Tachtiris extend this concern by foregrounding how translation mediates cultural authority and positionality. Gorjanc critiques the pervasive phallogocentric logic embedded in most language systems and draws attention to emerging alternatives like Daly and Caputi's *Wickedary*, which challenge conventional lexicographic norms (91). Despite such interventions, queer linguistics remains a complex terrain, with mainstream dictionaries still tethered to corpus-based conventions that resist inclusive reform. However, Gorjanc views digital discourse as a promising avenue, with online dictionaries offering more expansive, historically situated, and nuanced definitions that move beyond normative constraints. His chapter aligns closely with the broader aim of this volume, to foreground intersectional and dissenting voices within TS. By encouraging critical engagement with the dictionary as an ideological tool rather than a neutral reference, Gorjanc reframes the ethics of translation to foreground translator agency and interpretive responsibility (94).

Tachtiris places the translator on an agential throne, both capable of and vulnerable to transmitting systems of inclusion and exclusion across time and cultures. Tachtiris elaborates on the productive discourse that challenges the universalisation of whiteness and the marginalisation of non-European voices in translation. White translators are often cast as "universal mediators," translators of colour frequently have their cultural labour ignored within the global literary marketplace. Tachtiris poses a vital question for scholars in

TS: What is the positionality of a translator? She seeks to liberate the translator from the role of mere mediator and instead frames them as an agential contributor who brings embodied knowledge to their engagement with a text. Tachitiris' advocacy rejects the myth of the "invisible" translator and reinstates their power through reflexivity and accountability, as if in conversation with Donato, Ogawa and Saraf. Her call for structural and institutional change underscores the importance of coalition politics and relational ethics in TS, destabilising translation in the best possible way.

Saraf's "Translating the Kama Sutra: Anglphone Contexts" in this volume discusses how the different English translations of the text manifested their varying statures in different cultural contexts and ages: either as a scientific manual or erotic artefact. Early translations by Burton and others had rendered the Kama Sutra as an exotic and pornographic material, to suit colonial expectations, but later Indian scholars tried to reposition it as serious scholarship rooted in ancient Indian epistemology. Saraf also discusses the impact that the paratextual material of a translated work, the forewords, disclaimers, etc., has on the perception of a text, reinstating the importance of a translator's positionality with respect to the source material. These postulations are in strong dialogue with Tachtiris.

David Gramling's "Translation and Translingualism" lays an important theoretical foundation for several case studies that follow in the volume. He positions "trans" as a dynamic, disruptive force that resists monolingual ideologies and embraces multiplicity. By contrasting canonical notions of translingualism with **social translingualism**, which includes marginalised, hybrid linguistic practices often excluded from literary prestige (112), Gramling draws compelling parallels between translingual and transgender experiences, both of which have been historically subject to disciplinary control (115). In line with Robinson and Gorjanc's chapters, he frames translation as an **ontological movement**—fluid, unstable, and forever in flux, a "zone of deformation" that unsettles fixed meanings. Quoting Enke and Göransson, he highlights how translation constantly negotiates between creating "something new" and maintaining the "illusion of an original" (116). In doing so,

Gramling reframes translation and trans as radically situated, plural processes of becoming and unbecoming. Additionally, the chapter critiques the Global North's continued privileging of cisheteropatriarchal, male authorship while relegating translingual translators to "sociological curiosities" (120). Gramling reinstates this by citing Kai Pyle's work on Indigenous Two-Spirit terminology, revealing the damage caused by mistranslations and settler-colonial erasure (117).

What fascinates me about this handbook is how it encourages the reader to think and relearn their perceptions of translation through the changing perceptions about sexuality. It simply does not take on the objective of understanding how well sexuality across cultures and time is translated. It also delves into the individual disciplines, both mutually dependent yet perfect in their own realms, to help make sense of one another. One gets to learn more about translation through the lens of gender studies in this volume because of the case studies that follow the theories.

Several chapters, like Trask Roberts' "Translating the Sexual Self: The Case of Juli(e/a)n Green" and Livia Monnet's "Translating Transfeminist Activism: The Case of STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries)" elaborate on the complexities of translating the self of non-normative identities and the activism advocating for these identities. These chapters amplify translation beyond the book to attend to its reciprocal relationship with identity formation. Jonathan Evans and Ting Guo's "Translating Girlhood: Queer Female Teen Dramas in Translation" and Ignacio M. Sànchez Prado's "Translating the Transgender Self: Hispanophone Translation Flows" also contribute to discussions on the metamorphosis of queer identity across translations written for and by different cultures. Similarly, De Witte's chapter "Translating Queer Drama: Performing Lorca's *El público* in Japanese Translation" extends Woods' erotics into the theatrical realm while echoing Tyulenev's notion of translation as a border-crossing practice that reconstructs meaning across cultural contexts.

One of the most compelling aspects of the volume, for me, is its references to Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* (2008) in its introduction, particularly in how Western translatory practices risk

overwriting same-sex indigenous behaviours and modes of existence with familiar academic terminology. This often results in the projection of certain sexual identities, such as "gay" and "lesbian", onto cultural contexts where such identities may not organically exist. The volume thus urges translators, readers, and scholars to resist the impulse to find a "right" or "closest" word when translating sexuality, and instead encourages an acceptance of incongruence, ambiguity, and difference.

To conclude, I was compelled to approach this volume as a rhizomatic whole of chapters that are consistently in dialogue with each other. The metaphor of its situation is also reflective of the process of translation itself, especially when rendered closely to the fluid spectrum of sexuality. The ambiguity and incongruence are embraced, celebrated, but never settled in this volume, leaving much scope for more readings to unfold in this space.

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