

# Dubbing culture:

## Indonesian *Gay* and *Lesbi* Subjectivities and Ethnography in an already globalized world

### ABSTRACT

In this article I explore how Indonesians come to see themselves as *lesbi* or *gay* through fragmentary encounters with mainstream mass media (rather than lesbian and gay Westerners or Western lesbian and gay media). By placing this ethnographic material alongside a recent debate on the dubbing of foreign television programs into the Indonesian language, I develop a theoretical framework of “dubbing culture” to critically analyze globalizing processes. [globalization, homosexuality, identity, Indonesia, mass media, nationalism, postcolonial]

As the 20th century begins to recede into historical memory, “globalization” presents itself as a completed project: We appear to live in a world that is already globalized (Appadurai 1996; Gibson-Graham 1996; Hannerz 1989; Miller 1995). Even with this state of affairs, however, globalization is more than background noise. Although a certain academic fatigue has set in concerning globalization, these processes are shifting and intensifying and so demand our continuing attention. Ethnography has an important role to play in such a refocused analysis, for it can show how even the most apparently “remote” communities are caught up in globalizing processes in ways that impact subjectivities as well as social circumstances (e.g., Tsing 1993).

Such are the foundational concerns of this article. In it, I bring an analysis of how Indonesians come to think of themselves as *lesbi* or *gay* through encounters with mass media, together with a late 1990s controversy over the dubbing of foreign television shows and films into the Indonesian language, in order to develop a framework for rethinking ethnography in an already globalized world. (To keep *gay* and *lesbi* distinct from the English terms *lesbian* and *gay*, I italicize them.<sup>1</sup>) I call this framework *dubbing culture*, where *to dub* means, as the Oxford English Dictionary phrases it, “to provide an alternative sound track to (a film or television broadcast), especially a translation from a foreign language” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, volume 4).

With regard to *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians, my goal is to develop a theory that can account for a contingent, fractured, intermittent, yet powerfully influential relationship between globalization and subjectivities. Two additional requirements for such a theory are as follows. First, it must not mistake contingency for the absence of power; it must account for relations of domination. Second, such a theory must not render domination as determination; it must account for how *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians transform this contingent relationship in unexpected ways.

More broadly, the framework of “dubbing culture” provides one way to conceptualize the relationship between persons and the cultural logics through which they come to occupy subject positions under contemporary globalizing processes. In particular, it does so without relying on biogenetic (and, arguably, heteronormative) metaphors like hybridity, creolization, and

diaspora, which imply prior unities and originary points of dispersion. *Gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities do not originate in the “West” (they are not perceived as diasporic), nor are they a hybrid of “West” and “East”; they are distinctively Indonesian phenomena, formed through discourses of nation and sexual desire as well as a sense of linkage to distant but familiar Others.

Gibson-Graham (1996), in a feminist critique of globalization narratives, notes their similarity to rape narratives: Both present a masculinized entity (the rapist, global capitalism) as always already in a position of dominance and a feminized entity (the rape victim, the local) in a position of weakness. This is more than a metaphorical parallel: As narratives about relationality and transfer, stories of sexuality are stories of globalization and vice versa. Gibson-Graham hope that “a queer perspective can help to unsettle the consonances and coherences of the narrative of global commodification” (1996:144). In this spirit, I explore how “dubbing culture” might provide a way to understand globalization as susceptible to transformation. In queering globalization in this manner, I do not lose sight of the immense suffering and injustice it causes. Instead, I highlight that this suffering and injustice is caused not by a singular “globalization,” but by a complex network of interlocking economic, political, and social forces that are not always in agreement or absolute dominance. In terms of the dubbing metaphor, we might say that the voice of globalization is powerful but that that voice does not “move” across the globe. Rather, it is dialogically reconstituted; it is in a constant state of “dubbing.”

The framework of “dubbing culture” is crucially concerned with agency: It questions both deterministic theories that assume the hailing of persons through ideology and voluntaristic theories that assume persons voice and “negotiate” their subjectivities vis-à-vis structures of power. As a result, it aims to provide a more processual and conjunctural understanding of subjectivity: It gives us a new way to think through the metaphorical construal of hegemonic cultural logics as discourses. To “dub” a discourse is neither to parrot it verbatim nor to compose an entirely new script. It is to hold together cultural logics without resolving them into a unitary whole.

In this article, I first develop the concept of dubbing culture through a close ethnographic analysis of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation on earth and home to more Muslims than any other country, is a useful site from which to investigate emergent modalities of globalization. As a result, this article addresses itself to scholars with interests in contemporary Southeast Asia. Second, this article speaks to literature on the internationalization of *gay* and lesbian subjectivities, suggesting that this literature sometimes overemphasizes politics and activism, assuming that such globalization primarily takes place through channels like sex tourism, the consumption of “Western” lesbian and *gay* media, and the travel of non-

“Westerners” to the “West.” Third, I see this analysis as a contribution to mass-media theory. In much the same way that print capitalism presents a general precondition for national imagined communities, but in a manner open to reinterpretation (Anderson 1983), so contemporary mass media present a general precondition for dubbing culture, but not in a deterministic sense. I thus examine ways in which mass-mediated messages that might appear totalizing (because of their association with powerful political-economic actors) are, in fact, susceptible to contingent transformation. Just as the dubbed television show in which “Sharon Stone speaks Indonesian” does not originate in the United States, so the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions I examine are Indonesian, not, strictly speaking, imported.<sup>2</sup> Yet just as the range of possibilities for a dubbed soundtrack is shaped by images originating elsewhere, so the persons who occupy subject positions that are dubbed in some fashion cannot choose their subjectivities just as they please. I move, then, from a literal, technical meaning of “dubbing” to a more speculative, analogical usage as a way to explore the relationship between social actors and the modes of subjectivation (Foucault 1985) by which such persons come to occupy subject positions.

Beyond these three audiences, however, the ultimate goal of this article is to speak at a broad level to the state of culture theory. Might it be that dubbing culture occurs in the context of globalizing processes not directly related to mass media, sexuality, or Southeast Asia? Indeed, at the end of this article I ask if the “dubbing of culture” Indonesians perform when they constitutively occupy the *gay* or *lesbi* subject position is all that different from the ethnographic project in an already globalized world. This article, then, has a reflexive (indeed, postreflexive) dimension. It asks if the ways in which much contemporary ethnography holds together, in tension, multiple cultural logics (like “the local” and “modernity”)—in such a way that they are coconstitutive, not just juxtaposed—might not be productively interpreted in terms of dubbing culture.

### Coming to *lesbi* or *gay* subjectivity

It is late morning in the city of Makassar (the regional capital of South Sulawesi province on the island of Sulawesi), and I am recording an interview with Hasan, a 32-year-old *gay* man I have known for many years. We are speaking about Hasan’s youth, and he recalls his first sexual relationship as a young teenager, which took place with an older friend at school. At that point Hasan had never heard the word *gay*:

**Hasan:** I didn’t yet know. I was confused. Why, why were there people like that? What I mean is why were there men who wanted to kiss men? This got me thinking when I was at home. I thought: Why did my friend do that to me? What was going on? Was it just a sign, a sign

of, what do you call it, just of friendship, I thought like that. I was still blind as to the existence of the *gay* world.

**Tom Boellstorff:** And to learn the term *gay* or about the *gay* world, how did that happen?

**H:** I knew later, when I was watching television. I saw on the “world news,” there it showed a gay demonstration. And according to the information there . . . the people who were demonstrating, um, wanted the government to accept the marriage of men with men. And that made me confused. Why was it like that? That’s when I was in high school [about two years after his first sexual experience with a man].

**TB:** And when you saw that, about that gay demonstration, what was your reaction, your feelings?

**H:** I felt that an event like that could only happen outside; [that] in Indonesia there wasn’t anything like that. I thought that maybe because we had a different state [*negara*], a culture [*kebudayaan*] that wasn’t the same as [their] culture, so, maybe outside maybe it could be, and in Indonesia maybe it couldn’t be, but, at that time I didn’t think that there were people like that in Indonesia.

Hasan here recounts a moment of recognition, one that later leads him to look for other *gay* men and eventually call himself *gay*. Through an encounter with mass media, he comes to knowledge of what he takes to be the concept “*gay*” and retrospectively interprets his same-sex relationships before acquiring this knowledge in terms of “blindness.” Readers familiar with debates in queer studies over the internationalization of lesbian and gay subjectivities (e.g., Adam et al. 1999; Altman 2001) might seize on the fact that Hasan saw a gay demonstration as evidence of activism driving this “globalization,” but, in fact, this is the most unusual aspect of Hasan’s narrative. Three other elements prove more typical in the Indonesian context: Sexuality is tied to mass-mediated language; an outside way of being becomes intimate; and the border dividing *gay* culture from other cultures is national, not ethnic or local.

Since 1992, I have spent about two years conducting ethnographic research on Indonesian nonnormative sexualities and genders, primarily in Surabaya (East Java), Bali, and Makassar (South Sulawesi). This research focuses on men and women who term themselves *gay* or *lesbi*, on *waria* (better known by the derogatory term *banci*)—what I roughly term male transvestites—and on persons calling themselves *tomboi* or *hunter*, who see themselves in some cases as masculine *lesbi* women and in other cases as men trapped in women’s bodies.

Throughout my fieldwork, I have taken great pains to investigate how it is that Indonesians come to *lesbi* or *gay* subjectivity. The reason for this is that unlike so-called traditional homosexual and transgendered subject positions or

the *waria* subject position, *gay* and *lesbi* are not concepts with significant historical depth; they appear to have first arisen in Indonesia in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> They are experienced as new, not something one learns from one’s community, kin group, or religion. Sometimes, as in Hasan’s case, same-sex activity has taken place before thinking of oneself as *gay* or *lesbi*; in other instances such activity only begins after thinking of oneself as *gay* or *lesbi*.

Once *gay* men and *lesbi* women have come to *gay* or *lesbi* subjectivity and begin having homosexual relationships founded in that subjectivity, they usually begin to participate in what they call the “*lesbi* world” or “*gay* world” (*dunia lesbi*, *dunia gay*). These worlds are perceived to be nationwide, flourish primarily but not solely in urban areas, and are linked through travel, correspondence, and the informal publishing of small magazines. Later I describe some contours of these worlds, as well as the worlds of *waria* and “traditional” homosexualities and transgenderisms. For the purposes of this article, however, I focus on an early stage in the *lesbi* or *gay* life course, the process by which persons come to term themselves *gay* or *lesbi* in the first place.

This process appears, on first consideration, an ethnographic mystery. Most Indonesians, unless they are quite upper class or have traveled to the “West,” are unaware of the terms *lesbi* and *gay* or think the terms (and *homo*) are English names for *waria*. Even *gay* men and *lesbi* women who went to elementary school in the late 1980s or early 1990s recall the use on the schoolyard of terms primarily for *waria*, such as *banci*, but rarely *gay* or *lesbi*. No local culture, ethnic tradition (*adat*), or religion sanctions *gay* or *lesbi* or even names them with any systematicity. How, then, do these subject positions take hold in the hearts of so many contemporary Indonesians?

A few Indonesians say that they first learned of the possibility of becoming *gay* or *lesbi* from friends (usually not *gay* or *lesbi* themselves). A few *gay* men say that they first knew that they could be *gay* after wandering into a public area frequented by *gay* men, and a few *gay* men and *lesbi* women say that they became aware of the subject positions after being seduced. It appears, however, that only a small fraction of Indonesians learn of the *gay* or *lesbi* subject positions through all of these routes to erotic knowledge combined.

Another possible avenue is through small magazines that *gay* men and *lesbi* women have been informally publishing since the early 1980s. These magazines might play a conduit role, importing and transmitting “Western” concepts of sexuality. No informants, however, have ever cited these magazines as the means by which they came to think of themselves as *lesbi* or *gay*. The primary reason for this is that Indonesians seem to access these magazines only after first occupying the *lesbi* or *gay* subject position (Boellstorff 2003).<sup>4</sup> It is also clear that *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions existed for several years prior to the appearance of the first *gay* publication in 1982. Despite impacting the subjectivities of

those who read them, these magazines do not play a formative role. Although this may not remain the case in the future, particularly as greater press freedoms and increasing Internet access make the magazines more accessible, neither these magazines nor the other modes mentioned above explain how Indonesians have come to occupy the subject positions *lesbi* and *gay* to the present day.

For *gay* men and *lesbi* women, the element of Hasan's narrative with the greatest resonance is his description of a kind of "Aha!" moment when, during an encounter with *mainstream* print or electronic mass media, they come to think of themselves as *lesbi* or *gay*. Nearly 90 percent of my *gay* and *lesbi* informants cite mainstream mass media as the means by which they first knew they could understand themselves through the concepts "*lesbi*" or "*gay*." This is true whether the individuals in question are from Java, Bali, Sulawesi, or other islands; whether they are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist; whether they are wealthy, middle class, or impoverished; whether they live in cities or rural areas; and whether they were born in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s. Rarely is a cultural variable distributed so widely across such a diverse population. (In cases where peers tell *lesbi* or *gay* Indonesians of these terms, those peers apparently learn of the terms through mainstream mass media.)

The critical role of mainstream mass media in the lives of *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians is all the more notable when we compare the life narratives of *lesbi* women and *gay* men with those of *waria*. I have *never* heard *waria* cite mass media as the means by which they first saw themselves as *waria*; as I discuss later, they learn of the *waria* subject position from their social environs—schoolkids on the playground, a cousin, or neighbor—but not from mass media. Hasan's narrative rehearses a common story of discovery that most *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians see as pivotal in their lives, a moment they recall without hesitation, as in the case of the following Javanese Christian man in Surabaya:

In elementary school the only word was *banci* [*waria*]. For instance, a boy who walked or acted like a girl would get teased with the word *banci*. So I didn't know about the word *gay* until junior high. I heard it from books, magazines, television. And I wanted to know! I looked for information; if I saw that a magazine had an article about homos I'd be sure to read it. I knew then that a homo was a man who liked men. But I didn't know that homo meant *gay* at that time. So I tried to find out from books and things like that. I learned all of that stuff from the mass media. . . . So having someone come and tell me "It's like this," that never happened. I learned it all through magazines and newspapers. . . . And when I read those things, I knew that I was *gay*.

For this man "homo" is an impersonalized descriptive category, whereas "*gay*" is a framework for understanding the self's past motivations, immediate desires, and visions of an

unfolding future. Abdul, a Muslim man who grew up in a small town in Sulawesi, tells his story in the following interview excerpt:

**TB:** When you were in your teenage years, did you already know the term *gay*?

**Abdul:** In my environment at that time, most people didn't yet know. But because I read a lot, read a lot of news, I already knew. I already knew that I was *gay*. Through reading I knew about the *gay* world . . .

**TB:** What kinds of magazines?

**A:** Gossip magazines, you know, they always talk about such-and-such a star and the rumors that the person is *gay*. So that broadened my concepts [*wawasan*], made me realize, "Oh, there are others like me."

Because *lesbi* and *gay* representations mingle in these mass media, most *lesbi* women, like the following Balinese woman, also trace their subjectivities to encounters with mass media: "I didn't use the word *lesbi* because I didn't even know the term [when I was young]. I didn't hear about the word *lesbi* until about 1990, when I read it in a magazine. And right away, when I read about *lesbi* and what that meant, I thought to myself, 'That's me!'"

Consider the following narrative from Susie, a Muslim who terms herself a masculine *lesbi* woman (*hunter yang lesbi*). Susie has been talking about sexual relations with other women in her early teenage years, and I ask her if she knew the terms *hunter* and *lesbi* at that point:

**Susie:** I didn't know *hunter* yet, but I already knew *lesbian*, *lesbi*, I knew. I'd already—I'd already read it, don't you know?

**TB:** Read it where?

**S:** In magazines, through hanging out with friends who mentioned it, through means like that.

Susie then talked about short articles in newspapers that would occasionally mention how women could have sex with women, concluding, "Through that I could know that I was *lesbi*" (*lewat itu saya bisa tahu bahwa saya itu lesbi*). Indeed, the intertwining of *lesbi* and *gay* in mass media is so common that in at least one case a man who now calls himself *gay* termed himself *lesbi* for several years as a result of reading women's magazines, switching to *gay* only after reading a magazine "about historic English royalty . . . Richard someone."

The role of mass media is striking because to this day there is little coverage of openly *gay* Indonesian men or *lesbi* Indonesian women: What Indonesians usually encounter through mass media is gossip about Indonesian celebrities,

but particularly gossip about “Western” celebrities and gay and lesbian “Westerners,” real and portrayed.<sup>5</sup> And what they see is not a one-hour special on “Homosexuality in the West”; rarely is it even the kind of demonstration described by Hasan. *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians typically speak of brief, intermittent coverage: a single 15-second item on Rock Hudson’s AIDS diagnosis one night in the 1980s, an editorial about Al Pacino’s role in the movie *Cruising*, a gossip column about Elton John or Melissa Etheridge, or a short review of *The Wedding Banquet* or *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (two films that had homosexual characters).<sup>6</sup> Although some *lesbi* women and *gay* men actually see such films, either because the films make it onto Indonesian screens or, increasingly, are available on video or DVD, these Indonesians also stress the role of print media, particularly newspapers and women’s magazines like *Kartini* and *Femina*. References to Indonesians engaging in homosexual acts or terming themselves *lesbi* or *gay* in some fashion occasionally appear in these media, but in most cases the references to homosexuality are negative—psychologists presenting homosexuality as a pathology, or disapproving gossip columns. Sporadic coverage of same-sex scandals and arrests dates back to the early 20th century. The earliest extensive study of contemporary Indonesian homosexuality to my knowledge, sociologist Amen Budiman’s 1979 book *Lelaki Perindu Lelaki* (Men Who Yearn for Men), notes that

in this decade [the 1970s] homosexuality has increasingly become an interesting issue for many segments of Indonesian society. Newspapers, both those published in the capital and in other areas, often present articles and news about homosexuality. In fact, *Berita Buana Minggu* in Jakarta has a special column, “Consultation with a Psychiatrist,” which often answers the complaints of those who are homosexual and want to change their sexual orientation. It’s the same way with pop magazines, which with increasing diligence produce articles about homosexuality, sometimes even filled with personal stories from homosexual people, complete with their photographs. [1979:89–90]

Budiman later adds, “It is very interesting to note that homosexuals who originate in the lower classes often try to change their behavior by seeking advice from psychiatric or health columnists in our newspapers and magazines” (1979:116). In the 1970s, however, and among my present-day informants (a few of whom became *gay* or *lesbi* in the 1970s or earlier), many *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians are not changing behavior but coming to occupy what they see as legitimate and even healthy sexualities through these same mass media. From their beginnings to the present, these media have “exposed” not a fully articulated discourse of homosexuality, but a series of incomplete and contradictory references, in translation, sometimes openly denigrating and hostile. It is not a transmission of self-understanding so

much as a fractured set of cultural logics reconfigured within Indonesia. Yet from “translations” of this intermittent reportage come subjectivities by which myriad Indonesians live out their lives.

*Gay* and *lesbi* subject positions thus lead us to a specific sociological problem. Indonesians learn of the possibility of thinking of oneself as *gay* or *lesbi* through the intermittent reception of messages from mass media. These messages do not intend to convey the possibility of a kind of selfhood. They are often denigrating and dismissive, but above all they are *fragmentary*. In the 1980s an Indonesian might encounter such reportage a few times a year at most, if an avid reader; in the 1990s it became more frequent but still was quite minimal given the universe of topics appearing in the mass media. The question, then, is how modes of subjectivation become established when the social field in which they arise establishes them neither as discourses nor reverse discourses. Indonesian mass media certainly do not intend to set forth the possibility of *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions, nor do the imported programs they frequently rebroadcast; in fact, they rarely take a *negative* stance on *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions. Yet it is these mass media that, in a very real sense, make *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities possible, just as the national imagined communities that are so socially efficacious worldwide could not have existed before Gutenberg struck type to page.

### Subjectivities and subject positions

Readers may have noticed three somewhat atypical dimensions to my analysis thus far. First, the term *identity* has not appeared in this article, and I speak instead of subjectivities and subject positions. Second, I treat Indonesia as a single ethnographic unit rather than segregating data from Java, Sulawesi, Bali, and elsewhere. Third, I do not segregate data by gender but bring together *gay* men and *lesbi* women as well as transgendered subjectivities like *waria/banci*. All of these methodological and theoretical moves relate to the concept of “dubbing culture.” Addressing each in turn will foreclose some possible misunderstandings of this analysis and provide an opportunity to situate the narratives of Hasan, Susie, and the other informants in a wider ethnographic context.

In this article I eschew the identity–behavior binarism in favor of a language of *subject positions* (extant social categories of selfhood) and *subjectivities* (the various senses of self—erotics, assumptions about one’s life course, etc.—that obtain when occupying a subject position, whether partially or completely, temporarily or permanently). As many scholars of sexuality have noted (e.g., Elliston 1995), “identity” versus “behavior” is a false dichotomy: Identity is not only simply a cognitive map but also a set of embodied practices, and behavior is always culturally mediated through self-narrative. As a result, focusing on subject positions and

subjectivities turns attention to the total social fact of *gay* and *lesbi* selfhood. This is a basically Foucauldian framework that draws from the epistemological break between volumes 1 and 2 of *The History of Sexuality* (1978, 1985), wherein Foucault shifted from an emphasis on “the formation of sciences” of sexuality and the “systems of power” inciting sexuality to “the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being” (1985:4–5). This approach is attuned to the role of discourse in making subject positions intelligible historical and cultural possibilities, “an analysis of the ‘games of truth,’ the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience” (Foucault 1985:6–7), a framework that situates agency in specific discursive contexts.

I think of “subject position” as a rough translation of *jiwa*, which means “soul” in Indonesian but often has a collective meaning; *lesbi* women will sometimes say “*lesbi* have the same *jiwa*,” *waria* will say they “have the same *jiwa*”; or *lesbi* women and *gay* men will sometimes say they share a *jiwa*. I think of “subjectivity” as a rough translation of *pribadi* or *jatidiri*, both of which mean approximately “self-conception”; a *gay* man once distinguished *pribadi* from *jiwa* by saying that “every person possesses their own *pribadi*.” *Identitas* has a much more experience-distant, bureaucratic ring for most Indonesians: One *gay* man defined *identitas* as “*biodata*: name, address, and so on” (*biodata*: *nama, alamat, dan sebagainya*).<sup>7</sup>

### The Indonesian subject

This framework provides a useful place from which to consider the implications of treating Indonesia as an ethnographic unit for the case of the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions. Subject positions are not always lexicalized, but like any aspect of culture they always have a history. They come into being at a certain period of time, which shapes them, and they also change through time as long as they persist. Subject positions also always contain within them “spatial scales” (or “spatial fixes”; see Brenner 1998; Harvey 2000). To be a “Yale student” has a different cultural logic of scale than to be a “New Yorker” or “Japanese.” Additionally, the various subject positions through which we live at any point in time may not have isomorphic spatial scales: For instance, one’s sense of self as a youth could be global, as a man local, and as a laborer national, all at the same time. Or, to be a youth could be both local and global at the same time, intersecting. As a result, three crucial issues in the ethnographic investigation of subject positions are (1) their historicity (that is, the way they are shaped by their embedded notions of their own history and what counts as history); (2)

their spatial scales; and (3) how they intersect with other subject positions and the histories and spatial scales of those other subject positions.

In this regard, it may surprise readers unfamiliar with Indonesianist anthropology that the national imagined community has rarely represented a subject for ethnographic inquiry. Instead, anthropological research in the archipelago has been guided by what I term “ethnolocality” (see Boellstorff 2002). This mode of representation originated in the colonial encounter as a means of impeding the possibility of translocal spatial scales other than colonialism (in particular, nationalism and Islamic movements). As reified in the work of the Leiden school, “custom” (*adat*) was understood to belong not to the Indies as a whole but to groups framed in terms of the equation of ethnonym with toponym, an equation whose persistence has been noted by many scholars (e.g., Keane 1999:180). In this understanding (which can be *emic* as well as *etic*), culture is assumed to be the property of “the Balinese,” “the Makassarese,” “the Javanese,” and so on. Under this formulation Indonesia is a field of anthropological study, but not the “field” in which one does “fieldwork” (Josselin de Jong 1977). Although a large body of anthropological scholarship has productively denaturalized ethnolocality, at the level of epistemology it remains influential. Indonesianist scholarship now typically acknowledges that in the decades since Indonesian independence a national culture has taken root—aided by the state-supported spread of the Indonesian language and commodity capitalism—but that national culture is often treated as a force impacting local culture rather than the possible location of a subject position in its own right. This issue is of particular importance in the post-Soeharto era, when movements for regional autonomy and *adat* “revitalization” threaten to renaturalize ethnolocality conceptions of self and society.

But if ethnolocality can be problematized, if a subject of Java can be regarded as a subject of “Java” (Pemberton 1994), then can we dissolve the implicit scare quotes that prevent us treating a subject of “Indonesia” as a *subject of Indonesia*? Can there be such a thing as Indonesian *adat*? Can there be an ethnography of Indonesians? Are “the village” (Breman 1982), ethnolocality, and world religions like Islam and Christianity the only spatial scales shaping subject positions in contemporary Indonesia? Or could there be subject positions with spatial scales that are foundationally national, even if persons inhabiting such subject positions might consider themselves in terms of ethnolocality with respect to other aspects of their lives? Could one think of oneself, for instance, as “Madurese” with relation to conceptions of exchange, but “Indonesian” with relation to sexuality?

This ethnographic emphasis on locality is shaped by anthropology’s emphasis on difference. In this tradition, difference is expected: unproblematic, obvious, and authentic.

It asks nothing more than to be recorded, typologized, interpreted, and rhetorically deployed. Sameness, however, awakens disturbing contradictions. On the one hand, sameness is uninteresting: If you study the Other and they are the same, what is there to say? Are they a proper Other at all? At the same time, there is discomfort: Sameness cries out for explanation and modeling. It must have a reason: Is it diffusion or convergent evolution? There is a sense that contamination has occurred and authenticity has been compromised. In an already globalized world, however, anthropologies of similitude and translocality can illuminate new transformations of ostensibly “Western” discourses.

It goes without saying that there will be differences between different islands and ethnic groups, just as there is always difference between households or neighborhoods. At issue is the critical analytical moment when the ethnographer determines the boundaries of “the field” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), deciding at what point the threshold from similitude to difference has been crossed. This is a culturally located act, and in the context of this act, this heuristic compromise, it seems methodologically sound to take into account our informants’ senses of inhabiting subject positions with translocal spatial scales. James Siegel, in his classic *Solo in the New Order*, names this compromise when he says, “I want to stress how various Java is. Whatever claims I make about it should be understood to refer to [the city of] Solo alone, relieving me of the tiresome duty to qualify my statements in every instance” (1986:11). Although Siegel is certainly correct in pointing out the diversity of Java, the problem of spatial scale is not only one of overreaching but also of underreaching. It appears unlikely that Indonesians in Solo, even if ethnically Javanese—living in a city where one main cruising area for *gay* men is known as “Manhattan”—“refer to Solo alone” in their own cultural worlds. What Siegel points out here is the ethnographer’s tiresome duty of looking not only for solid data but also for a methodological and theoretical construction of the field site pitched as closely as possible to the cultural geographies of those whose lives the ethnographer seeks to interpret. Questions of the ethnography of translocality link to *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions on an epistemological level: In both cases a crucial element of the research is theorizing the threshold between similarity and difference. This will prove to be the central problematic of “dubbing culture.”

To date, most studies that consider the possibility of national subject positions in Indonesia focus on mass media or literature (e.g., Heider 1991). Although I foreground mass media in this article as well, mass media may simply represent the visible leading edge of a “superculture” that, as Hildred Geertz (1963:35) noted some time ago, includes the impoverished as well as the middle class and extends beyond urban centers in many cases. Sexuality and gender have been central elements of this national culture since its inception, and much contemporary work on women in Indonesia examines

the influence of the nation-state and, thus, at gendered subjectivities with a national spatial scale.<sup>8</sup> Looking at nonnormative genders and sexualities can contribute to this body of work and will provide important clues to the operations of “dubbing culture.”

## Gender and sexual relationality

### *National transvestites*

The most enduring “Western” stereotype regarding homosexuality and transgenderism in Indonesia (and Southeast Asia more generally) is that these regions are “tolerant.” Although it is true that there have been—and in some cases, still are—socially recognized roles for male-to-female transgenders as well as widespread acceptance of secretive homosexual behavior, transgenderism and homosexuality are hardly valorized in contemporary Indonesian society. Although homosexuality and transgenderism usually escape official comment, if directly asked, most religious and state authorities swiftly condemn transgenderism and homosexuality as sinful and incompatible with “Indonesian tradition.”

Considerations of nonnormative sexuality and gender in Indonesia sometimes focus on what I term “ethnolocalized homosexual or transvestite professional” (ETP) subject positions, such as *bissu* transvestite priests in South Sulawesi or the homosexual relationships between male actors and their male understudies in East Java known as *warok-gemblak* (Andaya 2000; M. Kennedy 1993; Wilson 1999). Although ETPs persist in some parts of contemporary Indonesia, I know of no cases where *gay* men and *lesbi* women see their subjectivities as an outgrowth of them (most appear to be unaware of their existence). This is not surprising, since ETPs are found only among some ethnic groups in Indonesia, are in most cases only for men and for only part of the life span, and are linked to adat ritual or performance. In fact, it is a misnomer to speak of ETPs as *sexualities*, as that term is understood in the “West,” since they are above all professions, not categories of selfhood organized around sexual desire.<sup>9</sup>

Waria are far more familiar to Indonesians—*lesbi*, *gay*, or otherwise. Waria are better known to the Indonesian public by the rather derogatory terms *banci* or *béncong*, but themselves tend to prefer *waria*, an amalgam of *wanita* (female) and *pria* (male) coined in 1978. A succinct but inevitably incomplete definition of *waria* is “male transvestites.” I use *transvestite* rather than *transgender* because most waria see themselves not as becoming female, but as men who (1) have the souls of women from birth, (2) dress as women much of the time, and (3) have sex with “normal” (*normal*) men. In contemporary Indonesia waria are truly “national”: Waria can be from any ethnicity, religion, or part of the archipelago, including Papua and Aceh. Unlike the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions, the national distribution of the waria

subject position is really a colonial distribution; the subject position has significantly greater time depth than the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions, dating to at least the mid-19th century and possibly earlier. Waria are much more visible than *gay* or *lesbi* Indonesians: Many dress as women 24 hours a day, but even those who do not are readily identifiable because of their feminine appearance (coded through tweezed eyebrows, long hair, and movements and speech deemed effeminate). In any Indonesian city and even in rural areas, you can encounter poorer waria on the street or in a park looking for sex work clients. Above all, you will find waria working at salons, and you would certainly hope to have a waria do the makeup and hairstyling for your daughter on her wedding day. It is this transformative power of waria to change the public appearances of others (in line with their ability to change their own public appearance) that is their *ilmu*, their great skill, in Indonesian society, and waria cite this as the reason they should be valued. Waria are part of the recognized social mosaic.

One consequence of this recognition is that, as noted earlier, waria do not come to that particular subjectivity through mass media as *lesbi* women and *gay* men typically do. This does not mean, however, that waria are absent from mass media and other public fora. You can see them in television comedy shows and Bayer Aspirin commercials or performing at amusement parks and Independence Day celebrations. In all of these contexts, waria are construed as artful, skilled in beauty, and as silly, worthy targets of disdain. In other words, although waria are acknowledged elements of contemporary Indonesian society, it would be a mistake to take seriously the orientalist claim that there is tolerance in anything but the barest sense of the term. The “Western” liberal assumption that to be public and visible implies acceptance (a notion that the concept of “coming out” reapplies to sexual subjectivity) does not hold here. Although the parents of waria usually release such children from the imperative to marry (particularly if the waria works in a salon and contributes economically to the household), some are thrown out of the family. Waria have been held underwater by angry fathers until they have almost drowned, have been tormented, stabbed, and killed by street youths, and have died of AIDS on an island far from home, rejected by their own families. At the same time, many waria enjoy steady incomes and relative social acceptance, and in some respects their condition is better than that of transgenders, lesbians, or gay men in much of the “West.”

All in all, then, it seems difficult to hold up Indonesia as a transgendered nirvana. Nonetheless, waria see themselves as a significant element of Indonesian national culture. Like *lesbi* women and *gay* men, they typically assume that others sharing their subject position can be found across Indonesia, but an important difference is that they have only a weak sense that people like them exist in other parts of the world. Indeed, they often ask me, “Are there waria in America?”

### *Gay and lesbi Indonesians*

I have never been asked such a question by a *lesbi* or *gay* Indonesian; just as the modern Indonesian nation-state is assumed to be one unique element in a global network of nation-states, so there is a strong sense that the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions are Indonesian phenomena linked to the global existence of persons with homosexual subjectivities (even if this is, in my experience, rarely phrased in terms of a movement). For these Indonesians, the prerevelatory period of sexual subjectivity is usually experienced locally; the local is the social space of the not-yet (*belum*) *lesbi* or not-yet *gay*. What they describe when they encounter the concepts *lesbi* or *gay* through mass media is a moment of recognition, a moment that involves a shift in sexualized spatial scale; it is not only that same-sex desire can be constituted as a subjectivity, but also that its spatial scale is translocal. The deictic “That’s me!” places the self in a dialogic relationship with a *distant but familiar other*.

On one level this spatial scale is national. One reason for this is that the mass media through which Indonesians come to *gay* or *lesbi* subjectivity employ the national language, Indonesian (not ethnoculturalized languages like Javanese or Buginese) and emphasize themes of national unity and patriotism. A second reason is that, unlike ETPs, the concepts *lesbi* and *gay* are seen as self-evidently incompatible with ethnoculturality: No one learns what *lesbi* or *gay* means through “Makassarese culture” or “Javanese culture.” *Gay* and *lesbi* persons thereby think of themselves as *Indonesians* with regard to their sexualities—to the point that they sometimes use nationalist metaphors of the archipelago concept (*wawasan nusantara*) to conceptualize their community (Boellstorff 1999). On a second level (unlike waria) *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians see their subjectivities as linked to a transnational imagined community: They regard themselves as one “island” in a global archipelago of *gay* and lesbian persons, a constellation including places like Australia and Europe as well as Malaysia and Thailand. They do not regard themselves as a “rerun” of the “West”; they view themselves as different, but this difference is not seen to create a chasm of incommensurability.

Based on my own fieldwork and that of other scholars, as well as the networks built by *lesbi* women and *gay* men, it seems clear that *gay* men and *lesbi* women can be found throughout Indonesia. Of course, this does not mean that they are found *everywhere* in Indonesia, but that they can be found both in major cities and in smaller towns and rural areas. Although some *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians are wealthy and well educated, most are not, giving lie to the stereotype that *gay* men and lesbians outside the “West” are the product of wealth, decadence, or estrangement from tradition.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, if one common “Western” misconception about Indonesia (and Southeast Asia more generally) is that transgenders are always valued members of society, another

misconception is that gay men and lesbian women are products of the executive, jet-setting classes. Here the cultural effects of globalization are thought to correlate with class in a linear fashion: The richer you are, the more you are affected by globalization, and thus the less authentic you are. The proletariat becomes the new indigene. As any Nike factory worker in Indonesia could tell you, however, class is poorly correlated with the degree to which someone is impacted by globalizing forces. And, indeed, most *gay* men and *lesbi* women in Indonesia are primarily lower class (90 percent of my *gay* informants make less than \$60 a month), do not speak English, and have never traveled outside Indonesia. From the testimony of my informants, it appears that most have never met a “Westerner” before myself—gay, lesbian, or otherwise—particularly if they have never spent time in Bali or Jakarta. Like *waria*, many *gay* men work in salons, but because they are poorly visible to Indonesian society, they can also be found in other professions, from the highest levels of government to street sweepers. *Lesbi* women can also be found in a wide range of professions, but many are quite poor, particularly if they have a masculine appearance that renders them unfit for careers deemed women’s work.

As noted earlier, most Indonesians still confuse the terms *gay* and *waria*, supposing that the former is an English rendition of the latter. *Gay* men and *waria* do not share this confusion, but they do see each other as sharing something: an attraction to men. Few *gay* men, however, speak of themselves as having a woman’s soul. Not all are effeminate; though many *gay* men *déndong*, or “do drag” for entertainment purposes, in the rare cases where *gay* men begin to dress like women all of the time, they consider themselves to have become *waria* (and are so regarded by other *gay* men).<sup>11</sup>

Like *gay* men, *lesbi* women can be found throughout Indonesia. In fact, there appears to have been greater mass-media coverage of *lesbi* women than *gay* men when these subject positions first entered public awareness in the early 1980s, but this is probably an artifact of the greater scrutiny placed on women’s sexuality in Indonesia more generally. As in the case of *gay* men, *lesbi* women can come from any class position—since they usually come to *lesbi* subjectivity through mainstream mass media, as *gay* men do, it is not necessary that they be members of feminist organizations, have a high level of education, or live in the capital of Jakarta.

There are many other similarities between *lesbi* women and *gay* men. Both usually describe their desires in terms of a “desire for the same” (*suka sama suka*). Another important similarity is that the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions both have a national spatial scale. To this day *gay* slang (spoken by some *lesbi* women as well) is based only on Indonesian, the national language, not an ethnic language like Javanese or Balinese. I have never been able to discover consistent geographical variation for *lesbi* or *gay* subjectivities: no

place where there exists an ethnic or island-specific network (though there is a national network), no place where expectations about heterosexual marriage differ from other parts of the country, no place where coming to *lesbi* or *gay* subjectivity takes place primarily through kinship networks, international tourism (even in Bali), or some modality other than mainstream mass media. Note that this is not a proscriptive argument. There is no reason that an ethnic-specific *lesbi* or *gay* subject position (“Sudanese *lesbi*” or “Batak *gay*,” for instance) might not emerge in the future: The point is that from the 1980s until the present this has not been the case, nor have *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians perceived this as a problem.<sup>12</sup> That the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions have this national spatial scale (and are shaped by state discourse) does not mean these Indonesians have a greater investment in the nation-state than other Indonesians; it does not imply patriotism any more than the shaping of “Western” homosexual subject positions by sexological and psychoanalytic discourse (Foucault 1978) means that these “Westerners” are enthusiasts of psychoanalysis. Similarities between *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians can be understood not only because of widely distributed conceptions of gender complementarity that de-emphasize gendered difference (Errington 1990), but also because *lesbi* and *gay* appear to have taken form in Indonesia more or less together, as gendered analogues, each implying the other and suggesting the (sometimes fulfilled) possibility of socializing between *lesbi* women and *gay* men.

A relational analysis, however, reveals differences between the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions. Perhaps the most consequential of these is the relationship between what we could call masculine and feminine *lesbi* women. As noted above, *gay* men sometimes act in an effeminate manner. The distinction between masculine and effeminate *gay* men, however, is not an organizing sexual principle; some *gay* men will say they prefer “manly” men (*laki-laki yang kebabakan*), which can mean non-*gay* men, but this is seen to be a matter of personal taste and does not denote a category of person. In contrast, a distinction between masculine and feminine *lesbi* women is ubiquitous in Indonesia, and it is typically assumed that sexual relationships will be between masculine and feminine *lesbi*, not between two masculine or two feminine *lesbi*.

This state of affairs might seem to be an import from the “West,” where a long tradition of butch–femme distinctions often plays an important role in lesbian communities (Halberstam 1998; Kennedy and Davis 1993), without a clear parallel in *gay* sexual norms. Indeed, some observers of *lesbi* Indonesians have characterized masculine and feminine *lesbi* women in terms of butch and femme (Wieringa 1999). Although not an intended interpretation, this could be seen to imply that the *lesbi* subject position, complete with an internal butch–femme distinction, is globalizing from the “West” except insofar as individual *lesbi* women “resist.”<sup>13</sup>

The key point, however, is that when *gay* took form in (not “globalized to”) Indonesia, it did so in the context of the well-known *waria* subject position. The *gay* subject position thus came to structure “desire for the same” within the category of masculinity. Although *gay* men and *waria* are often friends, it is considered highly abnormal for them to have sex with each other, since *gay* men are understood to desire “the same” (i.e., other *gay* or normal men) and *waria* “real men” (*laki-laki normal/tulen/asli*).

Crucially, however, no female analogue to *waria* existed at the time that *lesbi* took shape in Indonesia: Masculine women and female-to-male transgenders certainly existed, but they were not publicly known as a category of person, as *waria* were. As a result, the subject position *lesbi* includes not only women attracted to women (of masculine or feminine gendering) but also persons born with women’s bodies who feel themselves to have the soul of a man and strive to be considered social men. These persons, who usually call themselves “*tomboi*” (also *hunter* in Sulawesi and parts of Java, *cowok* [male] in parts of Sumatra, or *sentul* in parts of Java), tend to dress as men 24 hours a day and engage in stereotypically male activities (Blackwood 1998). Indeed, unless they speak, some are often mistaken for men on the street.

The consequences of this are manifold. First, like *lesbi* and *gay* (but unlike *waria*/banci), *tomboi* is understood to be a “foreign” concept that has been Indonesianized. *Tomboi* does not appear in a 1976 Indonesian dictionary (*lesbian* does, but *gay* is absent [Poerwadarminta 1976:592]); by 1991, however, it appears with the definition “an active girl, full of adventuring like a boy.” That *tomboi* was Indonesianized by this point is indicated by the fact that the term could already occur with the circumflex *ke-an* to form the abstract noun *ketomboian*, “*tomboi* matters” (Salim and Salim 1991:1630). These common Indonesian uses of *tomboi*, however, do not mark a minoritized sexual subject position but indicate what is understood to be a temporary and benign characteristic of young girls.<sup>14</sup> The use of the term *tomboi* to label an adult sexual subject position builds from this understanding in a manner that has no parallel for the terms *waria*, *gay*, or *lesbi*. An important topic for future research will be to investigate how the *tomboi* subject position is “dubbed,” both with relation to the “West” and to Indonesian popular culture, in a way that the *lesbi*, *gay*, and *waria* subject positions are not.

The most important consequence of this dual “dubbing” is that there is active debate among *tomboi* as to whether they are a subcategory of *lesbi*—masculine *lesbi* (as Susie put it, a “hunter who is a *lesbi*” [*hunter yang lesbi*])—or a separate transgendered subject position analogous to *waria*. For instance, the *tomboi* protagonist in the novel *Menguak Duniaku*, in the first of a series of pivotal encounters with mass media, reads about the first *waria* sex change operation (on Vivian Iskandar in 1973) and thinks to herself:

“I wanted to tell my mother, my father, that I was the same as Vivian” (Prawirakusumah and Ramadhan 1988:51).<sup>15</sup> This ambivalence regarding the *lesbi*–*tomboi* boundary does not appear to be localized to any one ethnic group or island: For instance, I have heard *tomboi* and *lesbi* women in both Bali and Sulawesi state, “Not all *tomboi* are *lesbi*, and not all *lesbi* are *tomboi*.” The sense that *tomboi* and *lesbi* might be separate subject positions is complicated by the fact that, whereas *gay* men and *waria* rarely have sexual relationships, *tomboi* and *lesbi* are ideal sexual partners (although some *tomboi* also have relationships with “real women” who, they often assume, will eventually leave them for men). The “desire for the same” that characterizes *gay* subjectivity is thus more fractured for *lesbi* women. This analysis shows how considering *tomboi* in relation to *waria*, *lesbi*, and *gay* provides a better understanding of the gendering of the *tomboi* subject position and its spatial scale than could be reached otherwise.<sup>16</sup>

### The “problem” of dubbing

Eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, are subclasses of the dominant fact of communication. . . . Sex is a profoundly semantic act . . . human sexuality and speech [together] generate . . . the process . . . whereby we have hammered out the notion of self and otherness.

—George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*

With this broader discussion of *lesbi* and *gay* life in mind, let us now return to the crucial role of mass media in Indonesians’ coming to *lesbi* and *gay* subjectivity. The relationship between mass media and being Indonesian has a long history in the archipelago. From the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, print media played a central role in the formation of nationalism among the diverse and far-flung peoples of the Netherlands East Indies. Print media were also important in the establishment of Indonesian (a dialect of Malay formerly used as a lingua franca of trade) as the language of this new imagined community, a language that could permit communication among a populace speaking over six hundred languages.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to some other postcolonial states like India, imports now represent a substantial amount of cinematic and televised fare in Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> Although there is a long tradition of filmmaking in Indonesia dating back to the early 20th century and at some points garnering nationwide audiences, in the late 1990s the Indonesian film industry generally produced only 15–20 films per year, mostly low-budget erotic films that went directly to second- or third-run theaters (Ryanto 1998:42).<sup>19</sup> By the late 1990s, each of Indonesia’s five private television stations was importing approximately seven thousand shows per year, many which originated in

the United States (Republika 1996), and beginning in the 1990s dubbing became an increasingly popular way of presenting these broadcasts to Indonesian audiences (Lindsay 2003).<sup>20</sup>

It was in the context of this rise in imported television that, in a joint news conference on April 4, 1996, one year after one of Indonesia's private television stations went national for the first time, Minister of Information Harmoko and Minister of Education and Culture Wardiman Djojonegoro announced that "foreign films on television should no longer be broadcast in their original language version with Indonesian summaries or subtitles but were to be dubbed into Indonesian" (Lindsay in press). This regulation on dubbing (*dubbing, sulih suara* [to substitute sound]) was to take effect by August 16, in accordance with a soon-to-be-passed broadcasting law, which included the first set of broadcasting regulations to be issued in 18 years. This bill, which had been debated in parliament for several months at that point, was to become one of the most contentious legal documents of the New Order's twilight years (the "New Order" refers to the 30-year rule of Soeharto, Indonesia's second president, which ended in 1998). The requirement that all programs be dubbed into Indonesian was greeted with little fanfare: As the public relations manager of station TPI noted, many of the programs imported each year by private television stations were already dubbed in response to viewer demand. Acquiescing to the state's long-standing goal of building nationalism through language planning, the public relations manager of station RCTI added that the requirement was "a good policy that will help build Indonesian skills in society" (Republika 1996).

Within a month of the announcement, however, Aisyah Aminy, a spokesperson from the House of Representatives, suggested "this problem of dubbing is going to be discussed in more depth" (*Suara Pembuaran Daily* 1996). Revealing dissent within the state apparatus, Aminy expressed concern that "at present, foreign films on television are not dubbed selectively and show many things that do not fit well with the culture of our people" (*Suara Pembuaran Daily* 1996). The influential armed forces faction also weighed in against the measure, but the House forged ahead, incorporating the dubbing requirement in its draft broadcast law of December 6, 1996.

What made the broadcasting bill such a topic of discussion was the way in which it was debated and revised, extraordinary even for the typically arcane machinations of the New Order bureaucracy. A first draft of the bill was completed by a legislative committee early in 1996 and sent to parliament for approval. As usual in the New Order, the bill had been essentially crafted by the president and even bore his initials (McBeth 1997:24). In December 1996, the parliament duly rubber-stamped the bill, returning it to Soeharto for his signature. After seven months, however, on July 11, 1997, Soeharto dropped a bombshell: In an official letter he

refused to sign the draft broadcast law and returned it to parliament for revision, claiming that "several articles will be too difficult to implement from a technical standpoint" (Kompas 1997; Soeharto 1997). This unconstitutional act was *the first time in national history* a president refused to sign a draft law already passed by the House, a refusal made all the more perplexing by his approval of the original bill (Kompas 1997). House debate on the president's proposed revisions began on September 18, 1997, and was marked by unusual (for the Soeharto era) interruptions from parliament members and heated argument over executive-legislative relations.

In the wake of the president's refusal, government sources gave conflicting accounts of the issues at stake. One issue, however, stood out above the others for its cultural, rather than directly economic, emphasis: the edict on dubbing. What was notable was the total reversal that occurred during parliamentary revisions: When the dust cleared in December 1997, Article 25 of the draft law, concerning dubbing, "had been completely reversed. All non-English language foreign films henceforth had to be dubbed into English, and all foreign films shown with Indonesian subtitles" (Lindsay in press). Why this sea change? As one apologist later explained:

Dubbing can create gaps in family communication. It can ruin the self-image of family members as a result of adopting foreign values that are "Indonesianized" [*diindonesiakan*] . . . This can cause feelings of becoming "another person" to arise in family members, who are in actuality not foreigners . . . whenever Indonesians view television, films, or other broadcasts where the original language has been changed into our national language, *those Indonesians will think that the performances in those media constitute a part of themselves. As if the culture behind those performances is also the culture of our people.* [Ali 1997:341–342, my translation, emphasis added]

In the end, the final version of the bill indeed forbids dubbing most foreign programs into the Indonesian language. What is of interest for our purposes here, however, is the debate itself. Why, at this prescient moment in 1997—as if foreshadowing the collapse of the New Order regime the following year—did translation become a focal point of political and cultural anxiety? What made the ability of Sharon Stone or Tom Cruise to "speak Indonesian" no longer a welcome opportunity to foster linguistic competency but, rather, a sinister force threatening the good citizen's ability to differentiate self from Other? Why, even with widespread discontent in many parts of the archipelago, was the state's fear suddenly recentered, not on religious, regional, or ethnic affiliation overwhelming national loyalty but on transnational affiliation superseding nationalism and rendering it secondary? And what might be the hidden linkages between this dubbing

controversy and the crucial role mass media play in *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities?

### Dubbing culture

An error, a misreading initiates the modern history of our subject. Romance languages derive their terms for “translation” from *traducere* because Leonardo Bruni misinterpreted a sentence in the *Noctes* of Aulus Gellius in which the Latin actually signifies “to introduce, to lead into.” The point is trivial but symbolic. Often, in the records of translation, a fortunate misreading is the source of new life.

—George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language in Translation*

We now have two problems centering on mass media. First problem: How do Indonesians come to see themselves as *gay* or *lesbi* through the fragmentary reception of mass-mediated messages? Second problem: Why would the question of dubbing foreign television shows into the Indonesian language provoke one of the greatest constitutional crises in Indonesia’s history? Both of these problems raise issues of translation and authenticity in an already globalized world. I suggest that we might address the first problem through the second. In effect, we can “dub” these two sets of social facts together and in doing so discover striking convergences and unexpected resonances.<sup>21</sup>

It was long after becoming aware of the link between mass media and *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities that I learned of the dubbing controversy. I had been struggling with the question of *lesbi* and *gay* subjectivities for some time without a clear conclusion, particularly concerning questions of agency. Were *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians simply mimicking the “West”; were they severed from their traditions once they occupied the subject positions *lesbi* or *gay*? After all, as I discuss elsewhere (Boellstorff 1999), *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians tend to view themselves in terms of a consumerist life narrative where selfhood is an ongoing project developed through treating one’s life as a kind of career. Alternatively, were these Indonesians queering global capitalism, subverting its heteronormativity and building a movement dedicated to human rights? Were they deploying the terms *lesbi* and *gay* tactically, as a veneer over a deeper indigeness?

A notion of “dubbing culture” allowed me to move beyond this impasse of “puppets of globalization” versus “veneer over tradition.” Through individual encounters with mass media—like reading one’s mother’s magazines or an advice column in the local newspaper, or viewing television coverage of a gay pride march in Australia—Indonesians construct subjectivities and communities. *Construct* is the wrong word; it connotes a self who plans and consciously shapes something.<sup>22</sup> Better to say that these Indonesians “come to” *lesbi* and *gay* subjectivity through these entanglements with mass media; their constructive agency, and the

*lesbi* and *gay* subject positions themselves, are constructed through the encounter. This is not a solely individual process; although the originary encounters with magazines or newspapers are typically solitary, as soon as the person begins to interact with other *lesbi*- or *gay*-identified Indonesians, he or she reworks these mass-mediated understandings of sexuality. Romance, for instance, is a crucial element of *lesbi* and *gay* subjectivities but rarely appears in media treatments of homosexuality.

A set of fragmented cultural elements from mass media are transformed in unexpected ways in the Indonesian context, transforming that context itself in the process. In other words, *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians “dub” ostensibly “Western” sexual subjectivities. Like a dub, the fusion remains a juxtaposition; the seams show. “Speech” and “gesture” never perfectly match; being *lesbi* or *gay* and being Indonesian never perfectly match. For *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians, as in “dubbing culture” more generally, this tension is irresolvable; there is no “real” version underneath, where everything fits. You can close your eyes and hear perfect speech or mute the sound and see perfect gesture, but no original unites the two in the dubbed production. This may not present the self with an unlivable contradiction, however, since in dubbing one is not invested in the originary but, rather, the awkward fusion. Disjuncture is at the heart of the dub; there is no prior state of pure synchrony and no simple conversion to another way of being. Where translation is haunted by its inevitable failure, dubbing rejoices in the good-enough and the forever incomplete. Dubbing is not definitive but heuristic, interpretative—like many understandings of the ethnographic project.

It is this dimension of dubbing that transcends the apparent dilemma of “puppets of globalization” versus “veneer over tradition.” The idea of “dubbing culture” indicates that the root of the problem is the notion of authenticity itself, the colonialist paradigm that valorizes the “civilized” colonizer over the “traditional” colonized. In line with the observation that postcolonial nationalisms usually invert, rather than disavow, colonial categories of thought (inter alia, Gupta 1998:169), the Indonesian state simply flips the colonial binary, placing tradition over modernity as the ultimate justification for the nation. To the obvious problem of justifying a recently formed nation in terms of tradition, the Indonesian state (like all national states) has worked ever since to inculcate a sense of national culture (*kebudayaan nasional*). This is built on the pillar of the Indonesian language and propagated via mass media. Through mass media, citizens are to come to recognize themselves as authentic Indonesians, carriers of an oxymoronic “national tradition” that will guide the body politic through the travails of modernity. By speaking in one voice—in Indonesian—a hierarchy of tradition over modernity can be sustained and reconciled with statehood.

“Dubbing” threatens this hierarchy: It is lateral, rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), “a multiplicity that cannot be understood in terms of the traditional problems . . . of origins and genesis, or of deep structures” (Bogue 1989: 125). The authoritative voice is at odds with the visual presentation. “Dubbing culture” sets two elements side by side, blurred yet distinct. It is a performative act that, in linking persons to subject positions, creates subjectivities (Butler 1990); but this “dubbing” link is *profoundly not one of suture*, a term originating in film studies regarding “the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers” (Silverman 1983:195). In “dubbing culture,” subjectivity is constituted not through suture but collage. Yet this productively partial incorporation of the self into discourse is not a failed performance: In its iteration, its holding together of two ostensibly incompatible cultural logics without conflating them, a space for subjectivity appears.

The original television show or movie may preexist its Indonesian dub temporally, but to the interpreting audience neither voice nor image is prior. They happen together; neither dominates. Agamben, citing Benjamin’s concern with the relationship between quotation and the new “transmissibility of culture” made possible by mass media, notes that quotation “alienat[es] by force a fragment of the past . . . mak[ing] it lose its authentic power” (1999:104). But “dubbing culture” (in a literal sense as well as the metaphorical sense I develop here) is more than just quotation; it adds a step, first alienating something but then reworking it in a new context. The power of the “dub” comes not by erasing authenticity but by inaugurating new authenticities not dependent on tradition or translation. It disrupts the apparent seamlessness of the predubbed “original,” showing that it too is a dub, that its “traditions” are the product of social contexts with their own assumptions and inequalities.

The Indonesian authorities were keenly aware of these disruptive implications during the dubbing controversy. For decades, Indonesian had been the vehicle allowing Indonesians to speak with one voice. But now the possibility that Sharon Stone could “speak Indonesian” meant that this vehicle was spinning beyond state control—into the control of globalizing forces but also into an interzone between languages and cultures, a zone with no controlling authority: “The Indonesian dubbing was so successful in making the language familiar that viewers lost any idea that it was strange for foreigners to speak Indonesian. . . . The language was too familiar, too much like real speech, too colloquial, and therefore the speech was too dangerous” (Lindsay in press).

The sudden shift during the dubbing controversy—from an insistence that *all* foreign television programs be dubbed into the Indonesian language to an insistence that *none* of them could be so dubbed—reveals a tectonic shift in the position of mass media in Indonesian society. For the

first time, fear of this juxtaposition, of “Westerners” “speaking” the national tongue, tipped the scales against a historically privileged concern with propagating Indonesian as national unifier. Now the ability of dubbing (and the Indonesian language itself) to explode the national imagined community—to show that one can be Indonesian *and* translate ideas from outside—presented a danger greater than the potential benefit of drawing more sharply the nation’s archipelagic edges.

“Dubbing culture,” then, is about a new kind of cultural formation in an already globalized world, one for which the idiom of translation is no longer sufficient. It questions *the relationship between translation and belonging*, asserting that the binarisms of import–export and authentic–inauthentic are insufficient to explain how globalizing mass media play a role in *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions but do not determine them outright. For queer studies, the lesson here relates to understandings of lesbian or gay non-“Westerners” in terms of “rupture or continuity” (Altman 2001) or “indigenous or Western import” (Jackson 1997:186). Although tactically useful, such binarisms do not capture the possibility of subject positions with more nuanced and conjunctural relationships to the “West,” ones that may stand outside usual definitions of identity politics.

In a metaphorical sense we might say that *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians dub “Western” sexual subject positions: They overwrite the deterministic “voice of the West,” yet they cannot compose any script they please; their bricolage remains shaped by a discourse originating in the “West” and filtered through a nationalistic lens. This process of dubbing allows *lesbi* and *gay* individuals to see themselves as part of a global community but also as authentically Indonesian. Unlike waria, they never ask, “Are there people like me outside Indonesia?” because it is already obvious—“built into” the dubbed subjectivities—that there are such people. These Indonesians imagine themselves as one national element in a global patchwork of lesbian and gay national subjectivities, not through tradition, because *lesbi* and *gay* have a national spatial scale.

More broadly, “dubbing culture” as a metaphor speaks to the nonteleological, transformative dimensions of globalizing processes. It is useful for questioning the ability of globalizing mass media to project uniform ideologies. Although it is true that contemporary mass media have enormous power, it is crucial to emphasize that this power is not absolute; it can lead to unexpected results—like *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions themselves. The metaphorical use of “dubbing culture” provides a useful fleshing-out of theories linking ideological apparatuses with Althusser’s thesis that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (1971: 160–162). By this, Althusser meant that ideology forms the subject positions by which individuals come to represent their conditions of existence to themselves and to others. Althusser terms this function of ideology interpellation or

hailing and illustrates it in terms of a person on the street responding to the hail “Hey, you there!” When the person turns around to respond to the hail, “he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him” (Althusser 1971:163). Many social theorists, particularly those interested in mass media, have found this a useful analytical starting point. The question most commonly posed to this framework by these theorists concerns the issue of structure versus agency:

Although there would be no turning around without first having been hailed, neither would there be a turning around without some readiness to turn. But . . . how and why does the subject turn, anticipating the conferral of identity through the self-ascription of guilt? What kind of relation already binds these two such that the subject knows to turn, knows that something is to be gained from such a turn? [Butler 1997:107]

Part and parcel of this dilemma of agency is the question: How are we to explain the circumstance when people “recognize” something the ideology does not intend? Indonesian mass media never meant to create the conditions of possibility for national *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions. One way to address this problem might be through the dubbing culture concept, where what is recognized in the hail *is itself a product* of transformation. This does not entail compliance with state ideology. Yet neither does it imply a free-wheeling, presocial, liberal self-assembling of an identity from elements presented by mass media, independent of social context.

*Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians often playfully employ the notion of authenticity (*asli*)—I have often heard gay men describe themselves as *asli gay*. In doing so, they implicitly challenge the state’s monopoly on designating what will count as tradition in Indonesia. Authenticity is crucial for mass-media studies as well. For Benjamin, the very concept of authenticity is put under erasure by mass media. Because mass media depend on mechanical reproduction (no mass media circulate as a series of handcrafted originals) and for Benjamin “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity,” it follows that “the whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical . . . reproducibility” (1995:220). Benjamin sees the most significant aspect of this reproducibility to be that of movement: “Above all, [technical reproduction] enables the original to meet the beholder halfway . . . the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room” (1955:220–221).

*Gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are not moved from one place to another, as Benjamin saw mechanical reproduction, but are the dubbing of cultural logics in new ways. “Dubbing culture” is thus articulation in both senses of the term, an interaction of elements that remain distinct—like

the image of speech and the dubbed voice—and also the “speaking” of a (dubbed) subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> This lets us “query” globalization without posing either an oppositionally authentic “native” or globalization as simple movement.

“Dubbing culture” also speaks to conceptions of translation in the age of mechanical production. As Benjamin notes with reference to magazines, “For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting” (1955:226). This is because captions are a guide to interpretation, juxtaposed to the work of art yet at a slight remove. They serve as “signposts” that “demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them” (Benjamin 1955:226). They are a mediation internal to mass media, a translation within.

Dubbing, far more than a subtitle, is a caption fused to the thing being described. It comes from the mouth of imagic characters, yet is never quite in synch. The moving lips never match the speech; the moment of fusion is always deferred, as dubbed voice, translation-never-quite-complete, bridges two sets of representations.<sup>24</sup> *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians dub culture as they live a subjectivity linked to people and places far away. They are completely Indonesian, but to be “completely Indonesian” requires thinking of one’s position in a transnational world. In speaking of translation, Benjamin wrote that “unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (1955:76). *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians have made of that echo subject positions that bespeak subjectivity and community even under conditions of oppression. They live in the echo, in the mass-mediated margin of incomplete translation, and find there authenticity, meaning, sex, friendship, and love.

## Coda

As I noted as the beginning of this article, the concept of dubbing culture has a reflexive dimension for ethnography in an already globalized world. Indeed, to the extent we can consider translation a structuralist enterprise framing movement between languages and cultures in terms of grammar and meaning, many contemporary ethnographers engage in “dubbing culture” when they employ poststructuralist frameworks that question received understandings of the relationship among signifiers, and between signifiers and signifieds.

Additionally, “dubbing culture” need not be construed only in synchronic terms. There has been a striking retreat from the anthropology of postmodernity in recent years, perhaps induced by the lamentable vulgarization of “postmodern” from a specific theory of political economy, representation,

and culture to an epithet hurled at methodologies or writing strategies one finds difficult to apprehend. Yet what is the emerging anthropology of alternative modernities—of modernity without metanarrative (Lyotard 1984)—if not an anthropology of postmodernity? And what is “dubbing culture” if not the antiteleological mode of historicity that produces postmodern bricolage, pastiche, the more-than-juxtaposition and less-than-unification of pasts, presents, and futures?

Contemporary ethnography, then, can be said to be engaging in dubbing culture when it brings together parts and wholes, data and theory. *Lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians engage in dubbing culture as they come to sexual subjectivity; they show not that “authentic Indonesian tradition” is a lie but that this authenticity is processual, constructed through active engagement with an unequal world. And if tradition and belonging are not given but constructed, they can be contested and transformed. The playing field is certainly not even—*lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians are not about to become fully accepted members of Indonesian society—but it is a playing field nonetheless, and there is space for change. Similarly, even in an already globalized world, non-“Western” cultures are not doomed to the status of reruns, even when confronted by “Western” hegemony.

## Notes

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1. Although the term *lesbian* is sometimes used in Indonesian, *lesbi* is much more common and I use it here. The predominance of *lesbi* over *lesbian* is probably because of two factors: Prototypical words in Indonesian have two syllables, and in Indonesian *-an* is a suffix. In this article I also place the term *West* in quotes to indicate that I view it not in geographic terms but as “a particular historical conjugation of place, power, and knowledge” (Gupta 1998:36). All italicized informant terms are Indonesian; in this article I follow standard Indonesian orthography except that the front unrounded vowel /é/ (spelled “e” in Indonesian, along with the schwa) is here written as “é” for clarity. All informant names are pseudonyms. All translations are my own.

2. The television reference comes from the title of Oetomo 1997, “When Sharon Stone Speaks Indonesian.”

3. The appearance of the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions in Indonesia in the 1970s is corroborated by a range of archival and oral historical data. In the 1988 novel *Menguak duniaku: kisah sejati kelainan seksual* (Revealing My World: A True Story of Sexual Deviance), the protagonist (a woman who feels like a man but does not

appear to know of terms like *tomboi*) discovers a magazine article that dates the public existence of the terms *lesbi* and *gay* to “1976, more or less” (Prawirakusumah and Ramadhan 1988:481).

4. One reason for this may be that even the most popular of these magazines (*GAYa Nusantara*, published from Surabaya) has a monthly circulation of about four hundred in a nation of over two hundred million.

5. In recent years, the linguist and anthropologist Dédé Oetomo has gained some prominence in mainstream mass media, along with a handful of other *gay* men. *Lesbi* women appear much more rarely in mass media of their own accord: A 1997 edition of the television show *Buah Bibir* discussing lesbianism in Indonesia featured Oetomo as a speaker and a handful of *lesbi* discussants appearing with their faces blackened out.

6. Imported programs come from around the world—with many favorites from India, Latin America, and Japan. To my knowledge, however, concepts of *lesbi* and *gay* subjectivity seem to be formed exclusively with reference to programs originally in English and originating above all from the United States, as these examples indicate. My thanks to Margaret J. Wiener for reminding me to clarify this point.

7. This is because of the linkage between identitas and state surveillance, not just the fact that it is a loanword. Loanwords can become experience-near concepts in Indonesia, as borne out not only by *lesbi* and *gay* but also by *Muslim*, *Kristen*, and even *Indonesia* (coined by a European in the 19th century).

8. This literature is too vast to list here; see, for instance, Brenner 1998 and many articles in Blackburn 2001; Ong and Peletz 1995; Sears 1996; and Sen and Stivens 1998.

9. Thanks to Kathryn Robinson for helping me develop this point.

10. See Murray 1999.

11. *Déndong* is a gay language transformation of standard Indonesian *dandan*, “put on makeup.”

12. There are two primary reasons why I do not believe ethnic-specific *gay* or *lesbi* subject positions will emerge in the near future in Indonesia. First, the cultural dimensions of current moves toward regional autonomy have been predominantly expressed through conceptions of adat revitalization; that is, in terms of a return to tradition that may in some cases be seen to include ETPs, but certainly not *lesbi* or *gay* subject positions. Second, as noted earlier, subject positions are shaped by the historical circumstances during which they first took form, and since the *lesbi* and *gay* subject positions were formed during the New Order era, it seems likely they will retain national spatial scales and cultural logics for some time to come.

13. This might also be taken to imply a globalization earlier than the 1970s, since the butch-femme distinction dates to at least the early 20th century in the United States and elsewhere (Kennedy and Davis 1993).

14. For instance, in a television commercial shown nationally in 2000, a mother comments on her favorite brand of laundry detergent as her young daughter is shown walking home from school, wearing a school uniform and also a Muslim *jilbab* (a “veil” that covers the head and hair but not the face). As the little girl runs home, getting dirt and chocolate ice cream on her *jilbab*, the mother opines, “My girl is a real tomboi.”

15. Not only have both tomboi and waria during my fieldwork described themselves in terms of gendered analogues, but *gay* men also have occasionally noted this relationship as well, as when the members of the “Indonesian Gay Society” claimed in their zine *New Jaka-Jaka* that tomboi and waria were “*biras* in regard to gender struggle”; *biras* is a kinship term referring to the relationship between two women marrying brothers or two men marrying sisters (IGS 1999:15).

16. For example, what might be the implications of the apparent fact that tomboi “in West Sumatra” think their subjectivities through the Indonesian language (Blackwood 1998), or that terms like *tomboi* are used elsewhere in Southeast Asia, whereas male to female transgender or transvestite terms do not transform “Western” terms (*waria* in Indonesia, but also *kathoey* in Thailand, *bantut* in the Philippines, and so on)?

17. See, inter alia, Anderson 1983, Errington 1998, Maier 1993, Siegel 1997.

18. See Mankekar 1999.

19. The number of films and television shows produced has varied according to many factors, particularly the general state of the Indonesian economy and political conflict. See Heider 1991 and Sen 1994 for detailed historical and contemporary accounts of Indonesian cinema (both works were published before the rise of private television in Indonesia). Heider (1991:19) notes that the number of films produced yearly in Indonesia has ranged from zero (in 1946 and 1947, for instance) to over one hundred in 1977 and 1989. There have been encouraging signs of a renaissance in Indonesian cinema since 1998.

20. The five private stations are RCTI, SCTV, TPI, Anteve, and Indosiar. Estimates of the proportion of shows originating outside of Indonesia range from two-thirds (Wahyuni 2000:116) from the United States to 50 percent from the United States and Europe combined (Groves 1996:42).

21. This seems possible despite the fact that *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians themselves tended not to take much notice of the dubbing controversy. I have never heard a *gay* or *lesbi* (or *waria*) Indonesian bring up the topic. When I have explicitly asked them about the controversy, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians both respond that they prefer subtitles to dubbing for the following reasons: (1) you can learn the original language, “even if it is just ‘buenos días’ in Spanish,” and (2) the dubbing “never follows the actor’s lips exactly.”

22. As does *negotiate*; these subjectivities are not negotiated in the sense that Maira (1999) speaks of an “identity dub” among South Asian Americans in the New York club scene. In that case the institutional context is not mass media but clubbing, and the individuals involved appear to be vastly more wealthy, English speaking, and mobile than *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians.

23. Here I use *articulation* in its English sense. The term originally entered social theory through Marx, but *Gliederung* has only the first of the two meanings noted above. The root word, *Gleid*, means “limb” or “joint” but can also mean “penis” (*männliches Glied*). Surely there is great potential in a psychoanalytic treatment that links the moment of speech to erection.

24. Lydia Liu notes that in studying how “a word, category, or discourse ‘travels’ from one language to another,” we must “account for the vehicle of translation” and address “the condition of translation” itself (1995:20–21, 26), a concern with a long history in anthropology as well (Asad 1986).

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