Translating Gender and Culture in Online Adaptations of Jane Austen

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Introduction

In many shapes and forms, the conversation about Jane Austen continues—even over two hundred years after the publication of ***Pride and Prejudice*** (1813). Austen remains incredibly popular and arguably infinitely adaptable to different times, cultures, and media—as evidenced not only by the numerous film, television, and textual spinoffs which have been around for decades, but also on the plethora of woman-oriented web adaptations targeting both global and more specific local audiences, including those in Asia.

The woman dimension, along with its intersection with Austen, is immediately apparent. Even a cursory survey of the Austen industry online will lead to the observation that female readers are its targets. For example, the merchandise available to "Janeites", a term originally coined by George Saintsbury for and later embraced by Austen aficionados (cited in Lynch13), includes jewellery, bags, and pink journals stamped with the author's image. Other fascinating novelty items are a t-shirt, dubbing the wearer "The Future Mrs. Darcy"; underwear bearing the words "Looking for my Knightley in shining armor"; and, a card game based on the premise that "it is a truth universally acknowledged that lovers of *Pride and Prejudice* want to marry Mr. Darcy" (Marryingmrdarcycom). A recent development in online Austenmania is *Ever, Jane, a* massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) scheduled for release in 2016. Rather than combat, the game requires social

strategy within "the confines of Regency-era culture and etiquette" (Everyjanecom). Gossip and awareness of the rules of genteel courtship help players to amass experience points to improve active character traits like status, duty, and reputation, or passive ones like beauty, grace, and wit.

The global reach of the Austen phenomenon and its intersection with women is also perceptible in many of the online venues for readers of Austen. For instance, the *Republic of Pemberley* (Pemberleycom) and *AustenBlog* (Austenblogcom), as well as the virtual homes of various Jane Austen Societies, are managed by women.[1] Female readers and fans are targeted by online quizzes that ask, "Which Jane Austen Heroine Are You?" (Oxforddictionariescom) or by interactive pages like "The Men of Austen" (Pbsorg, 2016), which offers up these characters as date-worthy specimens. Female devotees of Austen also upload hundreds of woman-focused fan productions: images, stories, reviews, and videos. In 2010, one of the latter went viral: *Jane Austen's Fight Club* (Card), a mock-trailer which juxtaposes Austen's proper nineteenth-century heroines with the cynical bad boys of the male-authored novel *Fight Club* (by C. Palahniuk in 1996) and the male-directed film of the same title (Bell & Fincher in 1999). That same year saw the launch of an American comedy web series called *Sex and the Austen Girl* (2010) in which a woman from 21st century Los Angeles exchanges places with a woman from Regency England. The female protagonists' discourse about the anxieties of each century emphasizes both the stark differences and the intriguing similarities between the two eras. Productions such as *Jane Austen's Fight Club* and *Sex and the Austen Girl* are particularly interesting because they pinpoint at two societies' similar repressions and disenchantments, as well as the cultural significance of Austen, that is, the use of her novels as venues for negotiating gender roles and constructing or questioning women's identity. This is what online adaptations of Austen do—they discover intriguing connections between vastly different centuries and cultures.

Additionally, there is the intriguing intersection of Austen adaptations with local cultures, particularly in Asia. In her survey of the many editions of Austen's novels, Margaret C. Sullivan

claims that these are "not merely *in* English; they *are* English". As a result, British society as a national character, "which propels so many of her heroines into their tribulations, (has been) trickier to translate than the author's words" (187). Perhaps the geographical distance of Asia from England explains the relative dearth of Asian adaptations. While there have been translations of Austen into European languages since the 1800s, Sullivan describes Asian translations as latecomers, with the earliest appearing in China at the turn of the 20th century (187). In contrast with their European and American counterparts, Asian translations seem to be in short supply. In "Seeking Jane in Foreign Tongues," Henry G. Burke cites only "a Chinese *Pride and Prejudice*, and three volumes in Japanese, which included *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*" (18). The Goucher Library (Goucheredu) lists just one Chinese translation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1961, 1976), while Sullivan features some more recent translations: a Chinese *Pride and Prejudice* published in 2010 by Changiang Literature Press (187), a 2006 Korean *Sense and Sensibility* titled *Mineumsa* (204), a 1996 Japanese *Emma* titled *Chuko Bunko* (205), and a 2010 Japanese *Pride and Prejudice* titled *Shinchosha* (206).

More adaptations and translations continue to be produced, however. Although the first Japanese translation of Austen appeared in 1926, there are now, according to researchers Ebine Hiroshi, Amano Miyuki, and Hisamori Kazuko), "as many as six versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, three versions each of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, and one of *Mansfield Park* in print". In the last two decades, South Asia has adapted Austen for both the big and small screen. For instance, there is the fairly popular *Bride and Prejudice* (directed by Chadha in 2004), a "Bollywood" (Indian) version of *Pride and Prejudice*; *Kandukondain Kandukondain/I Have Found It* (directed by Menon in 2000) a "Kollywood" (Tamil) film version of *Sense and Sensibility,* and *Aisha* (directed by Ojha in 2010), a Bollywood version of *Emma* set in Delhi. Television examples are *Kumkum Bhagya* (2014) and *Dedunnai Adare* (2015), respectively a TV Serial and a Sri Lankan TV Serial version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Not to be ignored are the postcolonial rewritings of Austen, such as

Krushanaji Keshava Gokhale's *Aajapasun Pannas Varshani* (1913), written in Marathi and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Swami* (*The Husband*) (1915), written in Bengali (cited in Natarajan 151, 142); Pak Wansŏ's *A Faltering Afternoon* (1977) and *Pride and Fantasy* (1980), both written in Korean (cited in Rajan 11, 15); and Vikram Seth's English-language novel, *A Suitable Boy* which is described as having "an Austenian form and an Indian substance" (Mohapatra & Nayak 195).

The convergence of all these intersections between Austen, women, the Internet, and Asian translation is the focus of this paper, which aims to examine the phenomenon of online re-imaginings of *Pride and Prejudice* as woman-centered cultural translation. Such a study requires an alliance of approaches as well—feminist literary criticism, cultural studies (focused on reception), and adaptation/translation studies—in order to provide a re-evaluation of Austen's novel that interrogates how gender is rewritten with Asian and, specifically, Philippine audiences in mind.

Two online texts from the 2000s are considered here as cultural adaptations of Austen with an Asian twist: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (directed and written by Green & Su, respectively), a transmedia adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*; and Katrina Ramos Atienza's *Well Played: All's Fair in Love and Football,* a Philippine-authored and print and web-published retelling of the same novel. In these texts, the cultural significance of Austen, the use of her novels as venues for negotiating gender roles, and constructing or questioning women's identity are engaged with/by their producers in specific ways and from specific perspectives. Such new methods and perspectives add to the understanding of how Austen can be translated for new audiences in Asia. The next sections will explore specifically how Austen's work is manipulated to reflect ideological and artistic interests of women and for the global, American, Asian-American, Asian, and Filipino audiences of these texts.

Gender and Race in a Multicultural *Pride and Prejudice*

The first of these texts is *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (*LBD),* an award-winning web series created by Hank Green and Bernie Su.

The series is considered here as an inter-semiotic translation—or an adaptation to a new medium—as well as a translocation of *Pride and Prejudice* to contemporary, multicultural America. The main narrative unfolds in video blog or "vlog" format serialized in a hundred brief episodes uploaded via YouTube from April 2012 to March 2013. Supplementary material also appears on other platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Google+. The result is a more nuanced retelling, especially with regard to its protagonist and other female characters, than that in many film and television mini-series adaptations.

Firstly, the nature of this format, i.e., the character of Lizzie producing and controlling the narrative, emphasizes Austen's artistic act of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describes in their seminal feminist works as dealing with "central female experiences from a specifically female perspective" (72). Through transmedia storytelling, *LBD* is able to convey Austen's free indirect speech in a way that other adaptations have failed to capture. The series both grants Lizzie the agency to tell her own story and fetishizes her perspective, which allows the heroine's faults to emerge, as was originally conveyed by Austen's idiosyncratic style, and emphasizes her enduring appeal among contemporary women.

This appeal has to do with Elizabeth's imperfections and in fact, her "wrongness"—not only about Darcy and Wickham, but also about herself, which has been discussed by a number of scholars. Marilyn Butler, for example, classifies her as one of Austen's appealing but faulty heroines, asserting at one point that "Elizabeth's pride in her own fallible perceptions is her governing characteristic" (372). In the novel's 36th chapter, Elizabeth chastises herself: "'How despicably I have acted!' she cried; 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have…gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust…I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away… Till this moment I never knew myself'" (Austen 156).

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, in fact, plays out to reveal that both Elizabeth and Darcy must overcome their faults in order for a happy union of equals to result. An entire chapter is devoted

to Elizabeth's self-examination, yet with the exception perhaps of the loose retelling H. Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), Elizabeth has been portrayed in cinema as a flawless heroine even before the necessary transformation. *LBD,* with the hyper-awareness of self-representation and internet audiences that goes along with the transmedia format, is able to show Lizzie's flaws and her unreliability as a narrator, making her both an appealing and relatable, i.e. translatable to new contexts ,"everywoman". *LBD* viewers see not only Lizzie's inconsistency in her treatment of and view of Darcy, but also her thoughtlessness toward other characters, and deliberate blindness to her younger sister, Lydia's, feelings. In the second episode, she introduces Lydia as "a stupid, whorey slut" (Su & Kiley) and later playfully but cruelly mocks her sister's actions. Thus, in the series, Lizzie's later discovery of her own partiality and absurdity are more fully appreciated by the audience, and the meaning of the original Elizabeth's words, i.e. the self-knowledge that makes her a truly admirable heroine, are effectively translated.

Because Lizzie authors/controls the production of her video narrative, viewers also hear from those closest to her, her sisters, and her best friend. It is noteworthy that the other characters who more frequently appear on Lizzie's vlog are mainly women: Jane, Lydia, Charlotte, Darcy's sympathetic sister Gigi, and even the "frenemy" antagonist Caroline. These female characters are more fleshed out in *LBD,* which leads to an expansion of the woman-centeredness of the text that goes beyond the perspectives offered by Austen.

Perhaps the most significant re-imagining of a female character here is that of the much-despised Lydia. Mary Kate Wiles, the actress who plays her, describes Lydia as someone often written off as "flighty and dumb", and extols the series for transforming her into a complex character that viewers "have thought-provoking discussions about" (qtd in White). The director's vision of her is as someone who "can't imagine losing her freedom to anything" (Green 2013); by describing her in this way, Green gestures toward what the series engages with: traditional courtship plots set in a time of comparative freedom for women. In the series, Lydia is the character least grounded in Austen's world, particularly when

one views the paratexts or optional side texts of *LBD.* Writer-director team Green and Su translate Lydia's giddiness as social-media savvy: she speaks the language of the internet youth and deliberately plays up her flightiness to establish an identity distinct from that of her sisters, especially Lizzie, who dismisses her—as do many adaptations—as stupid and immature. The transmedia format complicates this relationship and the character not just because it establishes that Lydia can hear what Lizzie says about her, but also because it provides her with her own venue for and agency in constructing her identity. It may even be argued that Episode 87, aptly titled "An Understanding," wherein Lydia explains what happened with Wickham, and Lizzie declares her support and love, offers a greater emotional climax than the already anticipated romantic reunion with Darcy in a later episode.

In fact, romance seems almost to take on a secondary role in *LBD* because of the screen time devoted to women's relationships. Charlotte, Jane, and Lydia, appear in far more episodes than the men do; for instance, out of the 100 episodes in the series Darcy appears in only five. Moreover, when the couples come together as they inevitably must, marriage and love do not spell the end of the women's quests and narratives. Jane's renewal of her romantic relationship with Bing Lee is on her own terms: he moves to New York and gives up his job to be with her. At the end of the series, Lizzie politely but firmly rejects a job offer from Darcy, choosing instead to become his competitor. She ends the vlog, "the catalyst of her success" (Zerne), to turn her attention to a new chapter in her life focused not so much on love but on leaving home and beginning a promising career. In *LBD,* marriage is not a foregone conclusion. Lydia thankfully does not end up in an unhappy marriage with Wickham, and Charlotte Lu even takes over the management of her employer's digital company. Thus, similar to Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, there is a variety of concerns and preoccupations for this American Lizzie. Yet it is also very clear that she—along with her "sisterhood"—has more options and even a virtual "room of one's own" for constructing her identity and sharing aspects of this with no longer just a British or European or American, but a global, audience.

Interestingly, the creators of *LBD* were conscious of this "vastly larger and different audience than what Austen may anticipated" and, thus, wanted it to reflect a "modern, multi-ethnic world" (Bong 2013a). In fact, Asian-American writer Bernie Su emphasized that one of his and Green's early requirements was "that the entire cast not be all Caucasian" as they both "strongly felt that (they) needed to have other races in (their) series to accurately represent (their) setting of contemporary America" (qtd in Bong 2013a). Thus, in this version of *Pride and Prejudice,* not only is Colonel Fitzwilliam transformed into gay African-American Fitz, but three of the major characters are Asian American: Mr. Bingley and Caroline Bingley become Bing Lee and Caroline Lee, and Charlotte Lucas (as well as her sister Maria who later begins her own spinoff vlog *Maria of the Lu*) becomes Charlotte Lu. While the inclusion of these cast members is not unproblematic—they are vaguely described by the creators as being "of Asian descent"—the translation of *Pride and Prejudice* from purely white to multiracial is a significant one.

The choice of YouTube as the series' main narrative platform is also racially significant. As reviewer Bong (2013a) says, "it's on platform with some pretty prominent Asian audience that will be able to relate to the Asian American characters." At the same time, she notes that the characters are not "presented through a racialized lens. It's not something that's pushed and pointed out for audiences; they just are what they are". This is backed up by actress Julia Cho who plays Charlotte. In an interview, she says, "I really dig the fact that we kind of make the statement about our diverse casting by not making a statement" (qtd in Bong 2013b). Indeed, the there are no overt remarks about Charlotte's—or anyone else's—ethnicity in the series.

Still, the choice is meaningful when considered alongside the fleshing out of Charlotte's character. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen's Charlotte Lucas accepts Mr. Collins' proposal after Elizabeth rejects him, while in *LBD*'s Charlotte says yes to an offer to work at the online media company Collins & Collins after Lizzie declines the job in order to finish her master's degree. The two have a confrontational argument in the modernization, which is resolved not by Charlotte's absence or the passage of time, but

by Lizzie's—along with the viewers'— eventual grasping of and empathy with Charlotte's reasons for the decision. This choice is framed as pragmatic, not the mercenary move described by Austen's Elizabeth as: a "[sacrifice of] every better feeling to worldly advantage" (96). As Charlotte Lu says in Episode 42 of the series, the decision she makes is "not that simple" (Su), i.e. not as simple as Elizabeth makes it out to be. Charlotte's much larger presence in the narrative, as well as the translation of the marriage offer aptly translated as a secure financial future, encourages contemporary viewers to regard a formerly minor character as a complex person whom they can care about and respect. Such an understanding may extend to a more nuanced grasp of a multicultural and multiracial society.

Gender and Race in a Philippine *Pride and Prejudice*

The second *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation discussed here is *Well Played* (2013), a novella by writer, editor, and blogger Katrina Ramos Atienza. This text may be labelled a glocalization, a concept described by Robertson as "the simultaneity and interpenetration of what are conventionally called and the local" (30). Specifically, the novel transposes the *Pride and Prejudice* narrative to a local campus of the University of the Philippines (UP) in the present day. While available in print form as an independently published book, this text may still be considered an online adaptation of Austen because of its use of a variety of non-traditional publishing platforms made possible by digital technology and the Internet. It is available for purchase as an e-book via the distributor Smashwords, as a Kindle and paperback edition on *Amazon.com*, and as a print edition via printer-publisher Books on Demand, which prides itself on its "radically-decentralized, direct-to-consumer distribution model" (Booksondemandcomph). Four chapters of *Well Played* have also been uploaded on Wattpad, an online community for posting or reading original work and fan fiction. Significantly, according to a 2014 *Inquirer.net* article, the Philippines is Wattpad's second largest market next to the United States (Umerez).

Well Played's connection to the internet and e-publishing is significant in light of the success of young Filipino women writers

like Mina Esguerra, who broke into the international market by publishing on *Amazon*, and 19-year old Wattpad author Denny R, whose stories went viral with over 12 million reads, and whose novel *Diary ng Panget* (Diary of an Ugly Girl) has been made into a film. *Well Played*'s author has a strong online presence—she has an official website and pages on Facebook, Goodreads, Amazon, Wattpad, and Smashwords. She seems to be maximizing the alternative publishing venues offered by the Internet, particularly for this version of *Pride and Prejudice* that is localized but still targets a global audience.

The transposition of Austen's novel to a different time and setting, specifically the Los Baños campus of the Philippines' premiere state university, again pinpoints at the preoccupations of the book's readers. *Well Played* adapts the conflict and barriers of the source text to reflect what is at stake for its contemporary Elizabeth as well as for the other young women in the story. Admittedly, the narrative falls back, at times on global and local gender stereotypes when it translates Elizabeth as Patrice Reyes, a Communications major, and Darcy as Paul Dalmacio, a Math nerd. However, the book's football-inspired cover design and the fact that protagonist Patrice Reyes is a varsity midfielder in the male-dominated sport of football and belongs to "the best women's team the University had seen since the 1980s" (2) undermine some of these stereotypes. Moreover, the main characters' degree programs are cleverly utilized to emphasize the gap between the two. They belong to two groups: Paul is with the Bachelor of Science group, notorious for their condescension toward Patrice's group of Bachelor of Arts students. He is also a self-financing student, whereas Patrice must maintain good grades to maintain her scholarship.

The female interactions in the novel are also significant in terms of the variety of personalities represented. While there is no Charlotte, there are conversations involving Patrice and other female characters, some recognizable as Austen's and some entirely new. There is Bit-Bit, the over-the-top president of the Organization of Literature, Speech, and Dramatics Majors. There are Patrice's soccer teammates, sorority girls, punk rock band girls, and cosplayers. And there is the vicious, malicious Marga Mañalac,

counterpart of Caroline Bingley, who tricks Gia (*Well Played*'s Jane Bennet) into getting drunk. One will recognize Mrs. Bennet in milder form in the boarding house landladies who say that "college is the best time to meet [a] husband" (3). These female interactions, along with such details peculiar to college life in the Philippines, make the new setting vivid and real; more importantly, they revive for the reader the female community of Austen's Elizabeth.

Even more significant is the glocalization or juxtaposition "of the universal and the particular" (Robertson 30) of specific gender concerns in this novel. In her study of ideology in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries,* Lori Halverson Zerne says that different "ideological fault lines" are negotiated in Austen adaptations and translocations. Austen's novel illustrates the ways in which financial and romantic concerns affect women and men differently in terms of marriage choices. For example, the Georgiana-Wickham and Lydia-Wickham relationships demonstrate the consequences of sex outside of marriage. In the American context of *LBD,* this is no longer a cultural taboo, and so the scandal is translated as abuse and manipulation of a different form: *LBD's* Wickham convinces Lydia, a web celebrity like Lizzie, to make a sex tape and then threatens to release it for sale online.

Similarly, *Well Played* seems to be negotiating sex in terms of female freedom in a contemporary yet still patriarchal Philippine context wherein the dangers of male power are very real to women. For example, instead of making up a lie about Darcy/Paul's snobbery and selfishness, Lars—the book's Wickham—accuses him of using force on his girlfriend, shoving her during an argument. This seems a more shocking and disillusioning revelation than that in the source text: Patrice calls Paul's actions "despicable, cowardly, evil!" (Atienza 54). Later, when Paul tells his side of the story, Wickham's manipulation of Georgiana Darcy's feelings in order to gain her fortune is transformed into the more violent act of Lars pushing a woman against the wall, feeling her up, and saying, "You want this. I know you do. You want this" (Atienza 66). Again, there is another form of extreme physicality and sexual violence: attempted rape—noteworthy because of the UP Los Baños setting, a campus that saw cases of rape in 2011, 2012, and 2014.[2] Men's

use of force and the effect of this on women is a preoccupation of the text. Paul talks of slamming his face into Lars the first time, but he holds back when he rescues Deenie (the book's Lydia) because he knows that Patrice hates violence. This is part of the Darcy transformation and Wickham denunciation: Paul tempers his strength with kindness, but Lars is *too* physical, both with his ex-girlfriend and with Deenie, and even spreads lies about having a sexual dalliance with Patrice.

In connection with the latter, *Well Played* also negotiates sex in terms of female freedom within a conservative Philippine context. While Patrice and her friends enjoy many freedoms in their modern university, they must still control their bodies to avoid peer censure, or worse, the physical attention of men like Lars. Significantly, this becomes most evident in a party venue called the University Students Apartment, or U.S.A. for short, which is described as "an unsupervised wonderland where the nights rang out with the sound of drinking" (Atienza 2). The descriptions of Deenie at U.S.A. parties, or on her way to them, are particularly striking: "She sashayed in a tiny black skirt, a halter top, black tights and high wedge sandals" (12); she sat "cross-legged on the floor, oblivious to the tiny shorts riding up her crotch" (58); she came "bounding out the door in a tank top and flouncy miniskirt" (71). Deenie's behavior threatens the reputation of the boarding house and earns her a form of banishment: her mother pulls her out of the university. Disturbingly, however, the sexual predator Lars escapes punishment while Deenie is destined for a place "[p] referably run by nuns, where there [are] no boys or sororities or raging parties [to] distract her from her studying" (101). "You see," says one of the landladies glibly, "not everyone is cut out for the University and all its freedoms" (102).

Austen and Contemporary Freedoms

The novel and other online incarnations of Austen may well be asking the question: "Are today's women—modern women, American women, Asian-American women, Filipino women—cut out for the contemporary world's freedoms?" Cultural Studies critics Suzanne Pucci and James Thompson say that Austen

adaptations mediate between "classic novels of court" which mediate between what cultural critics describe as "classic novels of courtship celebrating male and female harmony" and a variety of contexts that are "acutely aware of gender roles" (5). Looking back at Austen's Elizabeth Bennet is important because she is a female character who conquers her prejudices, accepts her errors, while still maintaining the wit, strength of mind, and sense of humor that readers admire. Moreover, she achieves what in the early 19th century was success for women—a marriage offering both love and financial security. The online and Asian Austens discussed here, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and *Well Played*, recontextualize women's choices in societies where marriage is no longer the only viable option but where finding love alongside other choices is still important to women; where new rules about agency in courtship need to be negotiated; where threats like sexual manipulation, violence, and abuse emerge as conflicts; and where social media and the Internet play a significant role in women's lives and identities.

Austen scholar Deidre Lynch talks of "the diverse frameworks within which audiences have claimed interpretive authority over (Austen's) meanings; about the varying motives audiences have had for valuing the novels and for identifying with or repudiating Austen's example; and about the divergent uses to which such alternative Austens have been put in the literary system and the culture at large" (5). The conversation about Austen, with Austen, and with our relationship with Austen will continue. Gender roles in Austen adaptations continue to be questioned and negotiated as new conflicts are introduced, new barriers overcome, and new endings reached. As Austen meets the Internet, web publishing, and global and local audiences, translations like these become spaces for creativity and agency to reaffirm, question, and renegotiate gender roles in Austen's world and our own.

Notes

The *AustenBlog* staff is composed entirely of women, and only one man's name appears in the volunteer committee that operates *The Republic of Pemberley.* The manager of the website of the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) is a woman, and most of the association's officers and board members are women. Paul Terry Walhus is the founder of *Austen.com*, but mostly women's names are posted under site management.

[2]UPLB student Given Grace Cebanico was raped and killed in October 2011, a 14-year-old UPLB high school student was raped in February 2012, and a 17-year old UPLB student was raped in October 2014.

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