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## **Orientalist obsessions: fabricating hyper-reality and performing hyper-femininity in Thailand's kathoey tourism**

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Depictions of servile and hypersexual transwomen have come to reinforce Thailand's reputation as an exotic and erotic playground. Despite their almost ubiquitous presence in tourist spaces, the theorization of transgender subjectivities from a localized Asian perspective tends to be glossed over in the literature on leisure and recreation, perhaps due to their complex position within a Western-centric, binary model of gender and sexuality. This paper attempts to fill this lacuna by mobilizing the concept of Orientalism and relatedly, the Orientalist tourist gaze. In so doing, it argues that colonial mythologies of the Orient are writ large in the commodification of transgendered bodies and the evocation of hyper-realities. In this manner, even as kathoeyes (Thai vernacular for male to female transpeople) are capable of manipulating tourists in artful ways, I contend that postcolonial power asymmetries are systematically perpetuated through the 'libidinization' of Thailand.

**Keywords:** transgender; Orientalism; postcolonialism; tourist gaze; sex tourism

### **Introduction: Orientalist sites of desire, global circuits of pleasure**

It has been argued that tourism is a profoundly gendered and sexualized activity (Enloe 1989; Swain 1995; Aitchison 2000, 2001; Hall, Swain, and Kinnaird 2003, Pritchard 2004; Pritchard et al. 2007; Jordan 2008). Much has been written about the commodification of sexual services vis-à-vis the lenses of postcolonialism, as well as how this can have far reaching impacts on host communities and tourists on the receiving end of such experiences (Kulick and Wilson 1992; Bishop and Robinson 1998; Handley 1989; Crick 1989; Cummings 1994; Selwyn 1993). In line with an embodiment turn in the social sciences, academics are beginning to appreciate the body as 'the material with which we experience and create gender' (Shrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005, 317) as well as the role of the bodily scale in constituting the national and global scales (Wilson 2011). As such, they have increasingly attended to the 'actualities of sexuality – the manners in which bodies are used by the tourist' and how these intersect with gendered corporealities in tourist spaces (Ryan and Hall 2001, x; Veijola and Valtonen 2007; Caudwell and Browne 2013).

In many ways, the sexualization of transgendered bodies points to a romanticized Orient, 'a world elsewhere, apart from ordinary attachments' (Said 1978, 190). Home to approximately 660, 000 kathoeyes (Ocha 2013), Käng (2011, 169) aptly identifies that 'alongside temples, snakes, crocodiles, elephants, and beaches, kathoey[s] have come to represent one of the natural, scenic, and amazing wonders of Thailand'. However, the role that male to female transgender bodies play in personifying Thailand as a (sex) tourism

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destination has largely been neglected. Accordingly, transwomen, as well as the theorization of their social geographies, have been sidelined in the scholarship on leisure and tourism geographies.

Meanwhile, a burgeoning body of work has just begun to attend to the proliferation of non-normative sexualities from the 'Global South' and there have been some attempts to situate kathoeyes within landscapes of global tourism (Jackson 2011; Ocha and Earth 2012; Ocha 2012, 2013, 2014; Spanger 2013). This paper aims to extend the literature by offering a postcolonial analysis of transgender bodily labour, which has yet to be systematically explored. By drawing on the concept of Orientalism, I contend that an imperialist and Orientalist tourist gaze continues to have salience in Thailand's kathoey tourism, even in a purportedly postcolonial era. In adopting a postcolonial approach towards the 'libidinalization' of Thailand, replete with its beautiful kathoeyes, the myth of the Orient, together with the power asymmetries inherent between host and tourist are reinforced. Despite evidence that kathoeyes are creative agents capable of manipulating tourists in artful ways, I argue that they are subservient subjects in a postcolonial political economy of sexuality.

According to Edward Said (1978), the perpetuator of an Orientalist gaze is often a paradigmatically Western, heterosexual and male tourist. Nonetheless, I use the term 'Orientalist' very loosely which may apply to tourists in general. Regardless of their gender, race and/or nationality, they can have the potential to, by virtue of their privileged status as 'tourist' and their purchasing power, exercise an Orientalist gaze on host communities, a gaze that searches for the strange and unusual. In addition, I consider tourists as Orientalist and colonialist when they subscribe to an exotic and erotic imagery of Thailand and its kathoeyes. In this regard, it appears that kathoeyes are subjected to an imperialistic gaze that exerts not just material but also an imaginative power over Thailand and its people. This throws light on the uneven power geometries that drive the global tourist economy, one that demands contextualization in the historical legacies of colonialism. For this reason, a postcolonial approach is not one that celebrates the end of colonialism, but an engagement with the ongoing ramifications of colonialism (Quayson 2000; Dorfman 2011).

Aligned to postcolonial epistemologies, it is crucial to situate kathoeyes in their Thai cultural milieu. Additionally, cultural anthropologists have reminded us that the term 'kathoey' cannot be conflated with Eurocentric terms such as 'homosexual', 'gay' or 'queer' (Jackson 1998; Brummelhuis 1999; Sullivan and Jackson 2001; Sinnot 2000; Winter 2011). They have insisted that there are no Western parallels to Thailand's kathoeyes and that an imposition of Eurocentric theories of transgenderism on non-Western cultures is a tyrannical assault on place-specific knowledges (Roen 2006). The Thai term 'phet' incorporates ideas of sex, gender and sexuality not bound by dualistic constructs of sex and gender. Rather, 'phet' accommodates gender and sexual diversity. Additionally, the terms transgender (loosely translated as *kham phet*) and queer are not commonly used in Thailand. While the informal English term 'ladyboy' is more widely invoked, it has the connotation of involvement in the sex industry. Consequently, its use may be pejorative in nature by assuming that all kathoeyes necessarily prostitute themselves for a living and are thus 'degenerate' and 'criminal' (Käng 2012). More realistically, researchers have conceded that the category 'kathoey' is a heterogeneous and nebulous one, even when used among the kathoeyes themselves. This is because it can refer to either one or more of the four dimensions, that of appearance (superficial cross-dressing), sex (hermaphroditism), gender identity (transformation towards femaleness) and sexual desire (homosexuality) (Sullivan and Jackson 2001; Costa and Matzner 2007).

Even though kathoey identities are in reality nuanced and varied, they are often typecast in popular culture as a comical caricature, usually engaged in a bawdy theatrical act, or as a hyper-(hetero)sexualized ‘second type of a woman’ (phu-ying prophet song) (Totman 2003). In this way, tourists tend to vacillate between perceiving them as sexually desirable and yet also as dangerous sexual others whose sexual power is to be feared (Padilla 2007).

Academics have consistently averred that a Western imagination of Thailand as an exotic tourist destination – for sexual services, and more recently, as a gay Mecca (Käng 2011; Jackson 2003, 2011) – rests upon a polarized distinction between the Orient and the Occident. The Orient, which is diametrically opposed to the Occident, is captured in hyperbolic new and traditional media representations of (trans)women as ‘uninhibited’, ‘licentious’ and ‘decadent’ who are therefore systematically reduced to easily accessible sexual partners for Western tourists. In this view, the Orient is a geographically dislocated place of sexual plenitude where tourists can lasciviously flirt with moral farness and rediscover their sense of virility through sexual conquest (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Graburn 1989; Kempadoo 2004). Even men who are experiencing a crisis of masculinity in their country of origin can mitigate the ‘problem’ by enlisting the services of as many kathoeyes (or women) as they please, as long as they possess purchasing power (Hamilton 1997). Orientalism thus functions on a binary logic, that of the Orient versus Occident, Self versus Other, masculine versus feminine, tourist/colonizer versus hosts/colonized. This sense of geographical dislocation that characterizes the lure of the Orient is often manifested in the strip clubs and go-go bars of red light districts in Patpong and Soi Cowboy.

I have already dealt with how a geographically (dis)located Orient justifies tourists’ exertion of Orientalistic impulses. The rest of this paper is divided into two main parts. First, I expound on how an Orientalistic tourist gaze is ubiquitously employed in the commoditization and objectification of kathoeyes and their identities. Second, I turn to hyper-real transgender performances within a simulacrum, where the boundaries between representation (an aestheticized reality) and reality become indistinct (Baudrillard 1990).

### **Commoditized bodies and transgender subjectivities**

It is unsurprising that tourism managers often project an essentialist imag(in)ery of Thailand’s kathoeyes in order for them to become intelligible national icons (Jackson 1997; Totman 2003; Costa and Matzner 2007). Postcolonial theorists have been at pains to illustrate that the fetishization of (trans)women as the exotic, erotic Other has blatantly disregarded the lived veracities and cultural complexities of (post)colonial contexts (Said 1978; Kabbani 1986; see also Fanon 1961). They have also noted that colonialist representations like these are prevalent in the promotion of tourist destinations and probably reveal more about imperialist assumptions of the East than the Eastern cultures themselves. Consequently, a power differential between the gazer and the gazed is set up as these Orientalist representations are a testament to the presence of an omniscient tourist gaze (Urry 1990a, 1990b). However, this power differential tends to be insidiously sidelined by the pomp and pageantry that accompany seemingly celebratory events involving a congregation of kathoeyes. Annual beauty pageants like Miss Tiffany Universe are cases in point.

Partially an attempt to placate the Orientalist tourist gaze and partially an attempt to come to terms with their ‘inner or trapped self’, it has been reported that most kathoeyes reconfigure and retrain their bodies in order to comply with a stylized and aestheticized

feminine figure (Bhabha 1983; Foucault 1977). As a dancer working in Pattaya explicates, kathoeyes have limited choices in the job market and are thus likely to end up in the sex and entertainment industry:

People think I have mental problems ... being a 'kathoey'. They didn't accept me for the job [at a factory] not because of my abilities but because of my gender identity. [Therefore] I decided to go where most transsexuals are welcomed, like the cabaret shows. Pattaya is really the place for us; we get respect as we attract tourists to visit Pattaya. (Ocha 2013, 89)

Other than the explicit provision of sexual services, another possible avenue where kathoeyes can find employment are cabaret theatres such as Calypso in Bangkok and Alcazar in Pattaya. These cabaret shows are marketed as 'family friendly' and form an indispensable part of the itinerary for package tours. Accordingly, tourists are bused to the theatres in 'convoys of coaches' almost daily (Totman 2003). Kathoeyes who are involved in the leisure and tourism economy<sup>1</sup> are invariably required to self-orientalize in order to conform to particular touristic imageries – and in the process of doing so – perhaps deny a more authentic presentation of themselves (Sontag 1977; Crick 1989; Truong 1990; Manderson 1995; Winter and Udomsak 2002). Inevitably, kathoeyes are violently appropriated, symbolically possessed and visually consumed by tourists who gawk at and snap pictures of their 'exotic' bodies, occasionally for a small tip. Likewise, kathoeyes working at Calypso profess that transgender bodies have been reduced to oddities on display, and dance performances have been reduced to freak shows:

I arrive at Calypso Cabaret in Asia Hotel to get ready to perform in front of a foreign audience who come to see what is described as a 'men dancing in women's clothes' show, one of Thailand's ports of call. When you start with that tag line, the audience will never see us as women, it also makes our gender non-conformity the main attraction, glossing over the fact that we are trained performers with real talent, not just a group of men who dress in women's clothes and prance about the place. (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 2008, 65)

The prostitution of kathoeyes' bodies and sexuality, parallels the prostitution of Thai culture more broadly. Indeed, Thailand has been anthropomorphized as a whore in the literature on the global circuits of sex work, with 'her' almost asking to be 'raped' or 'penetrated' in a pitiable exchange for tourism dollars (Said 1978; Barry 1995; Manderson 1995, 1997; Matthews 1978). In this regard, the penetrated subject, and by extension, the penetrated national state, is cast as a subservient 'recipient of foreign cultural flows' and hence, steeped in loss and shame (Käng 2012, 484). For Stoller (1997), infringements on Thailand's geobody, as well as that of kathoeyes' are both made justifiable by libidinal urges that are couched as not just 'natural' but also 'irrepressible'. Alongside the feminization of the Orient and its people 'as evil seducer, [a] licentious aberration', kathoey tourism leverages on the interaction between 'real' and 'fake' realms in order to manufacture a unique tourist experience (McClintock 1995, 124). The next section turns to kathoeyes' liminal position on the social map as they are presumably more 'authentic' in the expression of their gendered self, but are simultaneously 'not so authentic' as they often perform kathoey subjectivities with the Orientalist tourist gaze consciously in mind – minds that may have been colonized by the Anglo-American world view.

### Phantasmagorias: constructing hyper-reality, consuming hyper-femininity

Plugged into geographical imageries of Thailand as a sexual theme park, Asian scholars and cultural theorists have noted that kathoey tourism is located firmly within the postmodern (con)fusion of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ realms (Enloe 1989; Malam 2008; Hobbs, Na Pattalung, and Chandler 2011). They have suggested that the blurred lines between reality and fantasy excite tourists, who will sometimes test the image by reality, and at other times, test reality by the image (Eco 1987; Baudrillard 1990; Boorstin 1992). Occasionally, popular and touristic perceptions of kathoeyes as figures of ‘inauthentic’ masculinity, further complicates their social status as ‘fake women’, ‘fake men’ or both. Due to their slender build, Asian men are frequently deemed as more effeminate than their Western counterparts, a perception deeply rooted in an imperialist view of Asian masculinities as ‘inadequate’ and ‘inferior’ to more macho masculinities. A global flow of images has enhanced the visibility of androgyny and male effeminacy in Thailand. This has purportedly stirred up a cause for national concern, alluding to the emasculation of Thailand more broadly (Käng 2012). A kathoey who works at Calypso theatre attests to the scrutinizing Orientalist tourist gaze that searches for ‘difference’, which is epitomized in the strangely ‘fake’ and the unbelievably ‘real’:

There is added pressure on the girls at Calypso [Theatre] because we know that many in the audience expect imperfection, knowing that we are not ‘real’ women. They come to see the show with a preset attitude. Who still looks like a man? Sadly some audience are too quick to judge us. [S]ome members of the audience are so taken back, they look as if they have seen a ghost. I don’t know whether it is because they didn’t expect us to look this bad or this good. (Aldous et al. 2008, 91)

This gender ambiguity accentuates the kathoey’s exotic and mystical appeal. On the one hand, tourists are on occasions unable to distinguish a purportedly fake woman from a real one; instead, ‘simulations have come to constitute reality itself’ (Williams 2006, 484; Baudrillard 1988). Thai men who tend to be blessed with smooth skin and slender frames fit convincingly into the Western constructs of an ideal feminine figure, thus frequently rendering the kathoey hyper-real. The prefix ‘hyper’ highlights the importance of the copy, wherein the fake is deemed as being more real(istic) than the real (Crang 2013). Indeed, when ‘the real is no longer a given but is reproduced by a simulated environment, it does not become unreal, but realer than real’, ‘a hallucinatory resemblance of [reality]’ (Williams 2006, 484), not unlike how some ‘authentically fake’ kathoey bodies are thought to look and feel better than real biological women (Eco 1987; Brummelhuis 1999; Jackson 1999b; Totman 2003). Arguably, kathoeyes not only possess an unsurpassed intimate knowledge of male embodiment, she<sup>2</sup> ‘is [also] warmer, more passionate, sexier, and tighter than most women’ and in general, competent in the provision of a large repertoire of sexual services (Schifter et al. 1996, 115; Ocha 2012). Moreover, ‘being a woman [just] means [being] feminine, [her] sexual organs present no obstacle’ in an erotic encounter between host and guest (Schifter et al. 1996, 115; Brummelhuis 1999; Totman 2003).

On the other hand, it is well known that tourism thrives on the brazenly ‘fake’, of ‘fake’ women and ‘fake’ touristic paradises, where dissimulation – an endeavour to conceal ‘the fact that the real is no longer real’ – takes place, even as the ‘real’ may not be attainable (Baudrillard 1994, 13). For instance, widespread poverty is masked and so is the hardship that being a sex worker or a cabaret dancer entails. Concomitantly, it has been suggested that some ‘inauthentic’ kathoeyes are actually heterosexual men in masquerade. Their main impetus for feminine impersonation does not lie in

self-actualization per se, but is instead driven by pragmatism. The presumption is that they can better earn tourism dollars with a female body (Brummelhuis 1999). As a ‘fake’ kathoey regrettably reveals, ‘I didn’t become a woman to fulfil myself emotionally. I gave up sexual pleasure and a piece of my soul to earn a living as a prostitute [in the tourism industry]’ (Aldous et al. 2008, 152). Moreover, depending on the availability of financial resources and their ability to gain access to affordable health care services, it is not uncommon for some kathoeyes to be dissatisfied with the outcome of the surgical procedures that they have undergone (Ocha and Earth 2012). Further, due to an intensive re-sculpting of the body, even in semi-reassigned ones, many do not have a very long life expectancy. For those working as sex workers, they are also susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases (Walsh and Chaiyajit 2012). Nonetheless, Jackson (1999a) opines that men who cross gender boundaries purely for monetary reasons are the minority, while the majority are serious about their ‘career’ as a (second type) of woman (see also Winter, 2006). Furthermore, the prostitution of one’s gender identity is inextricably bound up in a global political economy. Accordingly, gender expression cannot exist outside of a socio-economic vacuum and for this reason, many tourists, as well as locals, are unable to ascertain ‘inauthentic’ kathoeyes (kathoey thiam) from ‘authentic’ ones (kathoey thae).

On a superficial level, kathoey tourism appears to be destabilizing Western-centric constructs of gender and sex, one that presupposes an active, heterosexual and masculine subject versus a passive, homosexual and feminized object. Cabaret shows that feature kathoeyes open up vibrant spaces for articulating the parodies of gender and sexual desire. In this regard, there is some potential for the stubborn dichotomies of masculinity–femininity and heterosexuality–homosexuality to be dismantled. Hence, some scholars have tacitly indicated that kathoey tourism affords a conducive space for the emergence of variegated gender and sexual subjectivities that may include more liminal, complex and alternative positionalities (O’Flaherty 1990; Manderson 1992, 1995; Ocha and Earth 2012; Ocha 2014). It has even been implied that kathoeyes could be forerunners in the pursuit of gender equality and erotic justice, a pursuit that is firmly transnational in nature. For instance, a kathoey who works as a dancer in a cabaret theatre has been quoted, stating that ‘every performance in Calypso is like a battle to gain respect for our third gender’ (Aldous et al. 2008, 92).

Within the space of the cabaret theatre, the anatomy of each kathoey remains an enigma, where gender ambivalence is sold as an allure and the tourists are entertained by speculating on the dancers’ biological sex. Two katoeys doing sex work in Pattaya and Bangkok respectively, have out rightly rejected the possibility of undergoing full sexual reassignment surgery:

It bothers me that people think sexual reassignment surgery is the medical treatment that should be applied [to] all of us. No. [It] is not for me. I’m proud of being [a] half and half. It is becoming part of who I am. I feel most comfortable this way. (Ocha and Earth 2012, 207)

If I consider my body purely in sexual terms, it is great that I can perform both passive and active roles. [T]his really makes me feel superior to those with a purely female body. I love my breasts. I do need them because I want to look great in female costumes in daily life but I don’t need a vagina. [R]eally, I don’t want to be 100 percent woman anymore. I want to stay a kathoey tee yang mai dai chaw [kathoey who has not been cut]. I feel comfortable as half and half. (Ocha and Earth 2012, 210)

To some extent, kathoeyes who possess a semi-transformed body are arguably more flexible in terms of their selection of their sexual partners (both gay and straight men) and

the enactment of their sexual roles (both receptive and penetrative). In this respect, these kathoeyes do disrupt a conventional gender order or a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990; Connell 2002; Ocha 2012). Following this line of inquiry, being in drag denaturalizes the consistencies between anatomy, gender identity and sexual practices by evincing that the body is not a static entity, but rather, is 'a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm' (Butler 2004, 7; Bell 1994). Moreover, it is possible for some tourists to consider such 'monstrous' and 'gender ambiguous' bodies (that may or may not be in transition) doubly exotic and erotic. According to Aldous et al. (2008, 113), it has been reported that 'some farangs [white foreigners in Thai] prefer the untransformed kathoey, so kathoey prostitutes will not have to pretend'. Consequently, a few bars in Bangkok, such as Mid Way, establish their niche in the market by hiring only 'women who can penetrate' [Siao Siap] in private, which is an unexpected attribute of someone who is visibly feminine in public. This allows their clients to maintain a façade of heteronormativity and thus, for these kathoeyes, their services would be terminated the moment they undergo a vaginoplasty (Ocha and Earth 2012, 206). In this case, the Orientalist object of desire need not always be 'authentically' female in order to tempt the male tourist gaze. It appears that the diversification of the sexual economy in Thailand has allowed a range of sexual roles and practices that 'exceeds simple binaries of normative heterosexuality and non-normative homosexuality', albeit within confined, personal spaces (Blackwood and Johnson 2012, 447; Ocha 2012).

Upon closer inspection, however, kathoey tourism perpetuates Orientalist conceptions of binary sex and gender categories. Arguably, a kathoey's subversion of a heterosexual matrix is momentary and not always publicly visible. Whereas some may contend that kathoey beauty pageants, which are popular among locals and tourists alike, can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering for the contestants; I argue that kathoey tourism is likely to be more oppressive than it is emancipatory as the beautiful kathoey remains vulnerable to an Orientalist tourist gaze. More pertinently, the notion of being in drag, of cross-dressing, necessarily implies that there is a 'more authentic' presentation of one's gender. This may end up reifying the very gender categories it strives to dismantle (Butler 1990; Schacht 2002). In tandem with the medicalization of everyday life and an attempt to keep up with American standards, individuals will have to be professionally diagnosed with gender identity disorder before sex reassignment surgeries can take place in Thai medical establishments (Ocha and Earth 2012; Käng 2012). Relatedly, the implementation of this stipulation since 1975 does not take into consideration gender as a continuum but instead necessarily forces kathoeyes to fit neatly into one of the two binary categories of gender, at least for the sake of obtaining the surgery. Hence, post-operative kathoeyes who are purportedly 'cured' of their gender dysphoria are not only subject to what Foucault (1973) calls 'disciplinary intervention' vis-à-vis the 'clinical gaze', they are also likely to end up affirming dichotomies informed by Western epistemologies, particularly the institutionalization of only two sexes, which further polarizes femininity–masculinity and male–female embodiment.

There are three key reasons why performances that pander to Orientalist tourist gazes are unlikely to be empowering and emancipatory for kathoeyes. First, while the kathoey violates prevailing standards of masculinity, she solidifies established notions of, and incites greater fascination of the 'beautiful' feminine body by donning cleavage revealing and enhancing dresses. This involves the extravagant use of make-up, amongst other technologies to govern her comportment, and the reconditioning of her voice. Not only does the 'success' of a kathoey's transformation hinge on how well she is able to discipline her body according to Western and sexist constructs of an ideal feminine form,

but her feminine ‘beauty’ also doubles up as a means of affective labour (Rivers-Moore 2013). Many of the dancers at Alcazar Cabaret are post-operative transwomen who have also undertaken a plethora of other cosmetic procedures such as hip filling, facial sculpting, eyelash extensions, and silicone, collagen and botox injections. Those working in go-go bars with live displays of kathoys ejecting objects from their genitals may even need to work on strengthening their pelvic muscles, a skill that will purportedly assist them in augmenting the sexual pleasure of their clients (Ocha 2012). In other words, their feminine embodiment has become a crucial site for the realization of economic profits. Moreover, the painstaking labour invested in the performance of a (hetero)normative femininity testifies to the significance of gender presentation (in comparison to her identification with a specific sexual orientation) in contributing to a kathoey’s sense of personhood (Brummelhuis 1999; Van Esterik 2000; Sullivan and Jackson 2001). As a kathoey working at Alcazar elucidates, ‘we are phu-ying (female) but since we are not real, we have to do everything better’ (Brummelhuis 1999, 131), thereby attesting to the compulsion for a hyperbolic citation of the feminine ideal.

Second, the gender bending potential of being a cross-dresser is sometimes spatially and temporally restricted to the cabaret theatres and hotel rooms. In some other tourist spaces, and for some other male tourists, ‘real’ or biological women continue to hold a place in the entertainment industry. In an autobiographical account of Benjamin Law’s (2012) forays into Queer Asia, desire and disgust for the exotic ‘fake’ Other, converge:

[In] Pattaya’s and Bangkok’s tourist bars, drunken male tourists would have similar but far less subtle variations of these conversations with me. For them, ladyboys are nothing more than the punchline to every loud, obnoxious joke they told. ‘Be careful which girl you take home!’ they slurred, ‘because she might not actually be a real girl, ya know!’ They laughed but I sensed a palpable fear. Or maybe it was arousal, or both. These men invariably knew of someone – always a friend, who had accidentally ended up sleeping with a transsexual Thai woman [while he was drunk] ... Still I suspected all these men had been willingly fooled.

Even though some tourists, as the quote above suggests, are ‘eager to accept the make believe’ and ready for ‘playful self-deception’, others continue to question the authenticity of their own (sexual) experiences and identities (Cohen 2004, 70). Therefore, websites for tourists publish tips on navigating ‘the treacherous terrain’, in order to filter out the authentic and gracious (in this case a biological Thai woman) from the inauthentic and commercialized (a kathoey) (Käng 2011, 173):

- If the girl has lumberjack hands or size 12 heels on there is a distinct possibility she is a he.
- Look for an Adams apple.
- Too much make-up. Thai girls generally wear very little if any make-up.
- If the girl has a thick layer of foundation on and enough make-up for a Vegas dancer then she is probably a ladyboy.
- If the girl is near to 6’ tall then either she is a model or a kathoey.
- If the girl is tall and beautiful and is NOT a model then it’s a good bet she is a ladyboy. Kathoeyes work very hard to make themselves as beautiful as possible, even going to the length of having surgery done. Eyes, lips, breasts and even the cut and tuck, though from all accounts most kathoeyes are cross-dressers without (having undergone the) final (sex reassignment) surgery.
- If she has facial hair.

- If your girl is muscular or has a hard athletic body there is a chance that she is a kathoey.
- If there is a bulge, it may or may not be there as some ladyboys will go as far as to tuck or even tape their privates up underneath their crotch.
- If she won't undress in front of you.
- Take a look at her friends. Ladyboys tend to run and hunt in packs like wolves. If her group of friends are obvious kathoeyes themselves then your little lady may be one as well (<http://www.thailandmusings.com/thai-girls/thai-kathoey/10-clues-that-she-is-a-ladyboy-or-katoey/> accessed April 2009, see also Hobbs, Na Pattalung, and Chandler 2011).

Likewise, a travel website alerts tourists to the craftiness of some kathoeyes in attempting to 'pass off' as a biological woman:

A lot of Thai transvestites are very pretty with a shapely body and can fool a tourist or expatriate into taking her/it/him back to his hotel room for the night. Especially if the tourist has had a few drinks and his perception of reality is blurred. ([http://www.yourpattaya.com/thai\\_transvestites\\_ladyboys.htm](http://www.yourpattaya.com/thai_transvestites_ladyboys.htm), accessed 28 April 2009).

The underlying assumption is that the consumption of transgender sexual services might threaten a male tourist's heteromascularity. For this reason, kathoeyes are likely to be subjected to intense visual scrutiny from male tourists who are resolute in guarding the 'sanctity' of their hetero-normal selves. For this reason, Aldous et al. (2008, 113) cite a kathoey involved in the sex (tourism) industry, who admits that 'prostitution for [a] kathoey (who is not fully transformed) is never a matter of pure negotiation. It always involves a degree of pretense and deception'.

Third, Phelan (1993) cautions that being spectacularly feminine crystallizes the power of the Orientalist tourist gaze; power that is manifested through the heightened surveillance of transgendered and transsexual bodies. Further, the 'paradox of beauty' entails that the beautifully gorgeous kathoey is hyper-visible and "will not be left alone, [she] begs almost, to be roughed up. Thailand is female and like any lovely women, is (almost) asking to be ravished" (Bishop and Robinson 1998, 80). By extension, the feminization of Thailand conjures up the image of 'her' almost begging for 'her' beauty to be exploited by tourists. Ocha and Earth (2012) go further to suggest that the exorbitant cost of sexual reassignment surgery fuels kathoeyes' motivation to be involved in the sex tourism economy in order to undergo the sex-change procedure.

In other words, just as tourism spaces are conceived as performative spaces, kathoey tourism involves a meticulously scripted, as opposed to a spontaneous performance of kathoey subjectivities which are inflected through an Orientalist lens (Manderson 1995; Hamilton 1997; Edensor 2000; Schacht 2002; Totman 2003). After all, these performances are always striving to meet touristic expectations: 'pre-existing stereotypes are not dismantled by actual experiences, but instead serve as standards against which visited culture is evaluated' (Andsager and Drzewieoka 2002, 403). Some academics may contend that in asserting a non-normative gender identity, kathoey subjectivities are in and of themselves already authentic beings (Padilla 2007). However, kathoeyes may still have to put on a front stage persona that adheres to touristic preconceptions, and an off or back stage persona where they return to their relatively more 'authentic' selves. As such, transwomen's efforts at transforming the self are enmeshed within tourist spaces that offer up a form of 'staged authenticity' for sale (Goffman 1959; MacCannell 1973, 1976;

Crang 2013). More broadly, this ‘staged authenticity’ parallels Thailand’s complicity in reinforcing Orientalist geographical imageries of itself as an exotic and erotic destination. ‘Authenticity’ is thus an elusive quest in kathoey tourism and experiences of the hyper-real calls into question our interpretation of ‘realities’.

Undeniably, kathoeyes are savvy cultural negotiators – they move competently across the realms of reality and hyper-reality while performing femininity persuasively. However, they remain incapable of inverting the postcolonial power structures that underwrite the host–tourist relationship. As a tourist icon set within an Orientalist canon, kathoeyes are compelled to remain legible so that the tourist can identify and consume them, metaphorically and literally, with ease (Rojek and Urry 1997). A kathoey may have to struggle hard for basic sustenance and is not likely to go on luxurious holidays herself. While she may have some space to assert her agency, for the most part, her decisions to engage in the (sex) tourism industry are firmly bound up in grids of power relations. As such, she continues to be an object of the Orientalist tourist gaze and is likely to be ensnared in positions of servility (Jagori 2005).

### Concluding thoughts

I have sought to demonstrate how transgendered bodies in Thailand are entangled in a dense web of ‘compulsively repetitious stereotypy’ as the global circulation of hyper-real touristic representations operates to sediment an Orientalist view of kathoeyes (Morris 1997, 61; see also Morris 1994). In this regard, these representations operate to engender simulacrum, which double up as tourism destinations (see Ravenscroft 2013). Further, tourism subsists on the stimulation of desire. Indeed, ‘the desiring psyche is a political and economic entity, and political economy is thoroughly invested with consumer and sexual desire’ (Edmonds 2010, 104). As global tourist icons, I have illustrated how *transgender* bodies need not be very *transgressive* in order to inflame voyeuristic and sexual desires. Neither does the articulation of *transgender* subjectivities *transcend*, or *translate* into dramatic *transformations* of the prevailing power structures between locals and tourists. Relatedly, I have argued that the kathoey’s hyper-real performances of (hetero)sexualized femininity are deliberately orchestrated to titillate and satisfy the Orientalist tourist gaze. In so doing, I hope to extend the existing literature by providing more nuanced accounts of tourism geographies by attending to the vicissitudes of trans-feminine subjectivities from a critical Asian perspective where the cultural location of ‘bodies, desires and ways of relating’ matter (Blackwood and Johnson 2012, 442).

An emphasis on kathoeyes’ difficult escape from the spectre of tourist gazes may be criticized as an overly pessimistic one that colludes in their victimization. In the same vein, presumptions of a unitary and unidirectional ‘tourist gaze’ have been identified as being overly deterministic (Aitchison 2005; Lewis 2003; Bhabha 1983). Nonetheless, I am not implying that as subalterns, kathoeyes are necessarily victimized, stripped of their ability to act, or that they do not possess a ‘reverse gaze’. The subaltern returns the gaze, and speaks to tourists, but on an unequal platform (Aitchison 2001, 145). This is because kathoeyes have a predilection to performing gender conformity, according to prevailing Orientalist stereotypes of the hegemonically ideal feminine body – not just for economic reasons, but also because kathoeyes aspiring to be a more ‘authentic’ woman would have to cultivate certain feminine attributes. Therefore, a persuasive performance of femininity is likely to involve much coquettishness, and gazes from kathoeyes may not be able to wield as much ‘power’ in comparison to a masculinist Orientalist a masculinist, Orientalist and tourist one.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, however, kathoeyes are skillful agents

in their dealings with tourists. These skills should not be discounted, even as they are incapable of overthrowing structural inequalities on a global and local scale. Furthermore, the kathoey is inextricably entangled in heteropatriarchal grids of power as her ideal sexual partner is mostly a normatively gendered man, if not one that identifies as heterosexual (see Blackwood and Johnson 2012). It is not uncommon for transpeople to experience more violence ‘because they pass as their desired gender perfectly’ (Jauk 2013, 808). For instance, a kathoey’s sense of femininity may be compounded by tourists’ masculine qualities, which are possibly also masculinist in nature, such as the propensity to objectify (trans)women as mere sex objects (Stoller 1979; Brummelhuis 1999). In any case, because a kathoey is also simultaneously construed as a symbol of flawed and failed masculinity, her subordination to a male tourist (gaze) is rendered legitimate (Jackson 1997). Although not all kathoeyes are engaged in the flesh trade, sex work provides a place where they can (over)compensate by being more ‘real’ than ‘real’ women even as they do not possess reproductive abilities (Jackson 1997).

Even though the narrative of the never colonised Siam is a source of pride for many Thais, an attendance to kathoey tourism affirms the ‘country’s semicolonial status in the Western-dominated world order’ (Jackson 2010: 38). In so doing, this paper has attempted to demonstrate the usefulness of postcolonial analysis by highlighting the ambiguously complex nature of the Thai-Western cultural relationship, in that Thailand has never been free from Western colonial influences, up till today. Although the commodification of kathoeyes’ bodies has allowed for a proliferation of transgender subjectivities, the asymmetrical power relations between the tourist and the kathoey cannot be entirely ignored. And while Orientalist discourses may be internally complex and unstable (Lewis 2003), much effort has been channelled into the construction of colonized subjects as fixed realities, so that tourists can exert better control over predictable Otherness (Bhabha 1986). Moreover, the lure of the East rests on its quintessential differences and geographical distance from the West. Indeed, these cultural differences fortify inequalities, such that the site of plunder is still the kathoey, and the Thai (geo)body. Future areas for research may include Thailand as a popular destination for gender reassignment surgery – as we are now witnessing a shift in focus, or perhaps an expansion in scope, from sex tourism to sex-transition tourism (Aizura 2011; Enteen 2014). How might this have an impact on the geographical imageries of a ‘mythical Thailand replete with non-normative gender constraints’, one that continues to be premised on the grounds of alleged sexual freedom? And how might this new trend reify old ideas of the Orient?

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### Notes

1. I acknowledge that not all individuals who seek sexual services from kathoeyes are necessarily tourists, or are tourists from Western countries (these individuals may be expatriates may even be domestic tourists from other parts of Thailand). Additionally, whereas not all kathoey-related tourism necessarily translates into transgender sex tourism, the complex links between the sex and tourism industry render it difficult to make clear cut distinctions between the two.
2. I have decided to use “she” and “her” to refer to kathoeyes, in order to emphasize the kathoeyes’ performed gender identity, which is predominantly feminine. Peter Jackson (1999) has also

noted the widespread, the widespread use of feminine personal pronouns among kathoeyes themselves. I avoided using s/he or (s)he because that would wrongly allude to the gender/sex subversive potential of the kathoeyes. Typically, kathoeyes working in the tourism sector inadvertently affirm Eurocentric and heteronormative gender/sex ideologies and this augments the intensity of the of the Orientalist tourist gaze.

3. Feminists have insisted that an Orientalist gaze is almost always a masculinist and heteronormative one (see Rose 1993). Although these 'different types of gazes' are a product of different epistemologies, in reality, colonialism and heterosexism often work in tandem to reproduce power differentials between hosts and tourists.

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