We are thrilled to inaugurate Queer Media Loci in this issue of *GLQ*. A new, ongoing series for the Moving Image Review, Queer Media Loci is designed to present a cross-sectional analysis of queer media at a specific location. As issues of globalization, border crossing, migration, and diaspora are increasingly being addressed in queer scholarship, we want to situate discussions around queer media production, exhibition, and reception within these debates and to shift the focus away from what remains a predominantly European-American context. In the Queer Media Loci series, we ask the following questions of each of our authors: What makes the chosen geographic location distinct? What kinds of queer media activities happen there? How do these media activities define or describe this locus? And how are they produced by, and how do they in turn produce, media representations of the locus?

In the series, we define a locus as a specific place—a city, town, village, neighborhood, region, or, in some cases, a country—that perceives itself as distinct and projects a distinct culture or identity to the world at large. Instead of presenting generalized surveys and lists of organizations, festivals, and other venues for exhibition and production, our cross-sectional approach encourages our authors to examine a broader, representative range of images and interpretations created through close reading, thick description, and an insider’s perspective. We ask our authors to consider queer media activities that range from commercial and industrial productions to underground, local, and grassroots activities, as well as events and cultural phenomena that do not necessarily manifest as conventional festivals or screenings, including online spaces and new media productions. The methodologies used by authors will vary by loci. Each locus, with its own social, cultural, political, and historical context, will require an approach that is appropriate to its circumstances. Thus, we anticipate commissioning studies from scholars, curator/programmers, activists, and other practitioners who are trained in different disciplines and have different expertise. Queer Media Loci presents a series
of specific, in-depth case studies that can help sketch out a larger picture of the queer media being produced, consumed, debated, and censored in locations that are increasingly visited and inhabited by queers, but not necessarily looked at or studied as centers of queer media production. In this sense, our use of the term *locus* is crucial in that its deployment signals the undoing of the relation between cities (the established, First-World queer capitals of San Francisco, New York, London, Paris, Berlin, and Amsterdam) and nation or region, and opens up into the less restrictive and non-Eurocentric category of place or location.

In conceiving the series, we are also aware of its potential dangers. We are wary of producing a queer touristic discourse—a sex tour of queer media in exotic locales, or an Atlantic or Olivia cruise with movies, as it were. We therefore encourage our authors to challenge and interrogate colonial and capitalist tendencies within their and our communities. In fact, queer sex tourism and the larger issue of queer touristic discourse are confronted directly in our inaugural project on Bangkok by Dredge Käng. As mentioned above, we also encourage our authors to examine other forms of intercultural communication, including migration, border crossing, and diaspora, and to look at how these transnational and global flows of information and bodies are expressed in and through queer media. We are interested in pursuing how these issues help define or disrupt a sense of place, focusing in particular on queer media that can construct or challenge nationalistic ideologies or other forms of localized group identity.

We are extremely pleased that Käng has taken up our challenge and produced an inaugural contribution to Queer Media Loci that exemplifies our goals for the series as a whole. His multifaceted analysis of the queer mediascape in Bangkok—a locus that is very much queer-identified but also visited and at the same time “othered” in relationship to the aforementioned First-World queer centers—examines diverse media forms, from Internet blogs to television and film to street protests. Käng’s essay performs important interventions in the popular (queer) media representation of Bangkok as a “gay paradise,” a “land of smiles” populated by Thai “boys” and “ladyboys” who are always eager to satisfy the sexual needs of visiting foreigners. Turning his ethnographic lens not on the “natives” but on gay tourists and ex-patriots, Käng analyzes the queer media they produce and consume as sites of anxiety over authenticity and postcolonial sexual exploitation. Media by and for locals, on the other hand, reflects much more complex expressions and receptions of queer sexuality. In some of the case studies Käng analyzes, queer media becomes the unwitting catalyst for debates on national identity and globalization. In sum, his survey of Bangkok queer media shows us examples of complex local and international attitudes and reactions to queer
media, in ways that exceed what we had hoped for in conceiving this series. We look forward to further developing Queer Media Loci with upcoming contributions from Israel/Palestine, Brazil, India, Vietnam, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

—Alexandra Juhasz and Ming-Yuen S. Ma

DOI 10.1215/10642684-2010-027

QUEER MEDIA LOCI IN BANGKOK
Paradise Lost and Found in Translation

Dredge Byung’chu Käng

It’s summer 2009 in Bangkok, the newsstands at Silom Complex are carrying Slim Up, with kathoey supermodel Ornapa Krisadee seminude on the cover as the main feature, offering to share her beauty secrets.¹ On a different rack one finds Worapoj Petchkoom, an Olympic silver medal–winning boxer, as the centerfold model of Stage, one of several magazines in the gay soft-core section.² Close by on another rack, @tom act, a “tomboy lifestyle magazine,” can be seen.³ On the wall of one of the many tourist agencies lining Silom Road, just down the block and across the street from the newsstand, images from Calypso, the most famous of the “lady-boy” cabarets in Bangkok, are juxtaposed next to glossy posters of the Grand Palace. Alongside temples, snakes, crocodiles, elephants, and beaches, kathoey have come to represent one of the natural, scenic, and “amazing” wonders of Thailand.⁴ Just a little farther down the street, the gay bars in Soi 4 offer free magazines with local information, event listings, maps, puff pieces, and event photos. The covers are adorned with male models in Speedos lounging at the beach, pool, or spa.

At the Telephone Bar, a group of Singaporeans sits down and orders a beer tower, a tall three-liter beer tap made to look like six by filling the core with ice. The appearance of excess is delightful, and they squeal when it arrives. All around are groups of men and male couples. Single men are often greeted by a young Thai man who would like to sit with them. No one needs to stay alone for very long. Drop an ice cube in your glass of whisky and soda, and you can almost hear the carbonation say, “Ahh! Welcome to (gay) paradise!”
I take a photo of my Thai friend home from college in the United Kingdom. One Singaporean sneers, “Tourists, I wish they would go home!” and his group toasts him. A gray-haired farang walks up to the bar. He plops down on a stool and waits for the bartender to turn around. “Thailand, this is paradise!” he exclaims. The bartender squints his eyes. “Really? This life more hell than heaven.” The farang frowns: “What do you mean?” The bartender pauses, then replies: “What you like drink?” What is lost in translation is the idea of “paradise” from a Theravadan Buddhist perspective, which is not of this world, but freedom from the existence of this world, its sensuality and materiality. Furthermore, what might be idyllic to a tourist is labor to those who make the pleasures of this world possible.

This is a glimpse into the representations and experiences that construct and contest Bangkok as a gay paradise. These scenarios raise the question: paradise for whom, in what manner, and to what extent? A survey of media and an analysis of select cases will demonstrate how Bangkok is portrayed as a gay paradise by foreigners and the limits of such a representation for local discourse and experience.

**Imagining Paradise: Queer Mediascapes in Bangkok**

Bangkok is saturated with queer (gay, kathoey, and tom) representations that construct what we see as queer Bangkok. The media differs depending on whether it is intended for a local or foreign audience. In the Western popular imagination, Bangkok is a “gay paradise,” a city that affords cheap and easy access to exotic “boys.” This reputation for sex tourism and a social tolerance for homosexuality and transgenderism is a common representation of queer Bangkok in English-language media. Yet Thai media imagery eclipses this one-dimensional portrayal. Here, I present several articulations within the queer mediascapes of Bangkok, including blogs, film and television, YouTube videos, and political demonstrations, to recontextualize the foreign gaze that constructs Bangkok as a gay paradise. Focusing on the media’s relationship to macrosocial changes and everyday experience builds on previous scholarship on Thai and Asian transgenderism and same-sex eroticism by showing the diversity of depictions and the complex forces that shape the competing ways through which queer Bangkok can be imagined. I argue that lack of access to Thai media perpetuates farang belief in their centrality to Thai desire. Additionally, Western gazes that depict Thailand as especially tolerant of homosexuality and gender variance may in fact inhibit the free expression of male-bodied effeminacy. Finally, I argue that the hypersexualization of Thais and
new regional alignments are molding local desires and subjectivities away from the West. Relationships with farang are increasingly stigmatized in favor of relationships with East Asians. Farang partnerships can carry a stigma because the Thai partner is visually marked as a potential sex worker (money boy, kept boy, etc.) and thus of low social status. This is particularly salient because of Thailand’s reputation for sex tourism. At the same time, the figuring and enactment of desire for East Asian partners has been enabled by the circulation of media, Internet sites such as fridae.com, and the proliferation of discount airlines that makes regional communication and travel possible.

**Sexpatriotism: Sex, Expatriates, Foreign Advice**

A variety of media, inside and outside Thailand, create the image of Bangkok as a gay-friendly tourist destination. The advent of online media has provided a new vehicle for disseminating information and advice. Blogs, YouTube, and other new media have become major sources for the imagining of Thai queerness from afar and the construction of local queer subjectivities. Such resources are more current and accessible than traditional print or moving image media; allow for greater interaction in their coproduction, circulation, and consumption; and can provide a sense of camaraderie, confidence, and intimacy. Web sources are highly trusted by tourists coming to Bangkok because they are easily compared and because participants on sites will provide their own commentary, giving them the appearance of greater objectivity compared to guidebooks, magazine articles, or tourist maps that provide recommendations in a singular voice.

In foreign online blogs and forums, what distinguishes Bangkok’s interpenetration of the cultural and the sexual is the fact that online media tend to reduce the local populace to the status of potential sexual partners. A fifty-something white American man living in Bangkok writes the “Rice Queen Diary” (RQD) blog to offer his “experiences and perspectives [to] those considering a long or short-term stay in Thailand.” The blog, initially devoted to the topic of sex, now covers broader issues such as “culture and communication.”

At first, sex in Thailand was a prominent topic of my blog. One of the great things about this place, particularly at my age, is the sex. On arrival I had more sex here, in one month, than in the previous 10 years! While my earlier posts read more like a kid in a candy store, I think the blog has evolved, as I have. The sex is still an important topic, but I believe my focus has shifted more to culture and communication, particularly as it relates to interacting with the boys.
The blogger uses the topics of culture and communication to obtain and maintain sex and companionship. He distinguishes his blog from other tourist sources that “sugar-coat” Thai life and fail to provide a “street wise” perspective on living in Thailand. He notes, for example, that his “experiences are predominantly with lower class boys.” As the blogger points out, most Westerners initially do not realize that the Thais they are interacting with in sexualized settings generally come from poor rural backgrounds and do not represent all Thai people, although they are a large segment of the population. Sex tourists often make the assumption that the behavior of sex workers is representative of Thai behavior in general, which is not the case at all, since sex workers are often breaking cultural rules around “appropriate” social interactions. This is particularly true in Bangkok, where there is a large middle class that is often publicly prudish and often differentiates itself from the poor by avoiding romantic relationships with farang. It is clear, however, that while claiming to demystify Thailand as a gay paradise, RQD reinforces the idea that sex is easily obtained, even for those who would only be competitive in specialized sexual markets at home (e.g., rice queens, daddies, bears). In an entry titled “Show No Interest,” he writes, “The difference in age and looks are not a huge factor in Thailand. A lot of Thais have a daddy complex. Some will even call you daddy in bed. . . . Similarly, a lot of Thais are into Bears, including the younger 20’s guys.” Such an assessment portrays young Thai men as nonsubscribers to gay North American beauty standards centered on an aversion to those who are older, large-bodied, or hairy. Taking up the role of foreign observers, RQD identifies a “cultural difference.” Yet intergenerational partnership and patronage are nothing new to either queer Western male or Thai cultures. Their taken-for-granted status, however, fails to engage the social and economic factors that make pairings between older white men and younger Thai men both feasible and desirable.

While the blog has changed its focus to “culture and communication . . . as it relates to interacting with the boys,” miscommunication continues to occur. In a post titled “Thai English,” the blogger describes Tinglish (Thai English) with the goal of helping foreign gay men interpret it for both relationships and everyday life. What is highlighted is the inadequacy of the Thai language and the difficulties Thais have with English, the latter represented as a marker of their inferiority. Such pronouncements, however, also point to the blogger’s limited understanding of the Thai language. He writes:

Thai is not a wordy language, so what might seem choppy, broken, or even a bit rude, may be a result of direct translation. That, and the fact their vocabulary is extremely limited, means a lot of words will be used when, in
proper English, there is a more accurate, or polite, way to communicate it. To understand what the boy is really trying to say, you want to avoid taking things too literal [sic].

Problems occur because most sexpatriates expect all their communication in Thailand to be conducted in English—which is an assertion of their privilege in sexual negotiations, where their needs are accommodated first and foremost. Phil, one of the commenters, reposts some Tinglish translations:

Copied from Pattaya Boys Talk

1. Today him holiday = He is with another customer
2. Him go home stay mother = He is in prison
3. You han-sam man = My rent is due
4. Him no working = He is a kept boy now
5. Excu me I go toilet = I have a short time customer waiting upstairs

These sarcastic interpretations reduce Tinglish to common “money boy” phrases and address another side of Thai-foreigner relations, that of deception. In fact, online foreigner advice focuses on warnings for the farang about the “annoyances” of living in Thailand. These generally fall into two themes: identifying whether a boy “really” loves him or just wants to be financially supported, and paying more for a sexual experience than is expected or “fair.”

Thailand’s largest expatriate Web site (Thaivisa.com) hosts a “Gay People in Thailand” forum. Posts frequently complain about Thai men, their inscrutability, and the difficulties of living as a foreigner in Thailand. Regardless of domain, any inexplicable difference can be reduced to a few pat phrases such as “This is Thailand” (TIT for short) or “welcome to the LOS (land of smiles).” Yet posts generally come to the conclusion that regardless of the difficulties of living in a country where one does not know the language, does not understand the cultural norms of relationships (especially kinship), and does not read emotions successfully, the situation is still better than in the poster’s home country. In summary, expatriate Web sites, blogs, and forum threads promote and reinforce the image of Bangkok as a place of sexual plenitude. The key is to learn how to navigate its treacherous terrain in order to sift out the good and authentic (the gracious and pliable) from the bad and corrupted (commercialized and agentive) “Thai boys.” A farang’s verbal dismissal of “paradise,” however, is often contradicted by his action of staying put.
In contrast to foreigner sites that focus on Thais, the Thai queer online world renders tourists and expats relatively invisible. Thais generally express little interest in reading farang forums, and Thai forums rarely discuss issues related to foreigners. They focus instead on music (especially K-Pop), celebrity and porn pics, relationship problems (with other locals), places to cruise men, and gossip about who was seen where doing what. Kathoey forums also focus on body modification, beauty contests, and issues related to civil rights. These sites are usually inaccessible to foreigners as they require Thai literacy. This lack of Thai interest in farang decenters the Western gaze, particularly in representations that construct Bangkok as a sexual haven.

There are numerous online cruising sites for Thai gay men and, to a lesser extent, kathoey. Camfrog is a webcam chat site immensely popular with Thai gay youth who chat with each other in Thai online slang. Other multilingual sites, such as GayRomeo.com, provide avenues for Thai-Thai, Thai-farang, and Thai-Asian interaction while the Hong Kong/Singapore-based fridae.com is used primarily by Thais to interact with East Asians. These sites differentiate audiences along the lines of age, race, ethnicity, geography, and language. In so doing, they allow most Westerners to feel central to Thai desire, as farang illiterate in Thai are linguistically excluded from sites in which they are not sought. At the same time, middle-class Thais remain acutely sensitive to their depiction as sexualized subjects. They thus avoid situations that potentially mark them as sex workers and thereby lower their social standing.

Centering the Metropolis of Angels:
A Brief Demography and Queer Geography

Krungthep (Thai shorthand for Metropolis of Angels, the Thai name for Bangkok), Thailand’s capital, mediates between the “other provinces” and the world-at-large in the production of its own distinct locality. The city is a major tourist destination. It draws economic and queer migrants from throughout the country and Thailand’s poorer neighbors as well as professional workers and retirees from the developed world. The city’s multiple-lane boulevards, many of which used to be canals, are clogged with traffic. Lined with shop houses, malls, office buildings, and condominiums, the roads are fed by an endless stream of soi, or small lanes, where most Thai people live and go about their everyday lives. What makes Bangkok distinctive to those visiting for the first time are the contrasts — skyscrapers rise above the sky train, while on the asphalt below, peddlers push carts and carry baskets slung on their shoulders with bamboo poles.
Most of Bangkok’s approximately 250 gay venues are found in the anonymity of a soi.16 Yet the extensive queer scene makes it a major destination for gay tourism and guarantees its “iconic status as a place of imagined sexual tolerance and liberality.”17 When people say there are a million gays in Bangkok, that figure may not be so far from the truth. There are approximately seventeen thousand kathoey among approximately half a million Thai males who have sex with males (MSM).18 This scale and the city’s status as a cosmopolitan hub holding large populations of foreign workers, expatriates, and tourists mean that social spaces and commercial establishments are highly differentiated and segregated along axes of gender presentation, class, nationality, and partner preferences.

Gay Bangkok is linked with Southeast and East Asian cities including Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur via large circuit parties attracting thousands of participants. These linkages are symptomatic of a greater trend toward regional integration in Southeast and East Asia (ASEAN +3: China, Japan, Korea).19 In Thailand, Japan alone invests more than double that of all European, North American, and Australasian countries combined. With Japanese restaurants supplanting American fast food chains, eating Japanese signifies modernity and wealth. East Asian media is dramatically shaping Thai aesthetics and fashion. The Korean Wave, in particular, has become a dominant source of television series, movies, and music.20 At gay bars, one will typically hear more Korean than Thai songs. Cosmetic procedures and devices, like eyelash extensions or big-eye contacts imported from Korea, are popular among gay/kathoey. At the same time, Thailand exports media to neighboring countries, and art films in particular are gaining attention internationally. Bangkok is central to a new queer Asian regionalism in which capital, media, commodity, and human flows are circumventing Western gay forms and fashioning new queer subjectivities.21

An Excess of Sissies: Stereotypical Representation and the Disciplining of Normative Masculinity

Examination of Thai television and film reveals the complexity of queer representations and their local contestations. Thai television is awash in male-bodied effeminacy. Thai television programming contains queer content almost every night. In 2004 the visibility prompted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s minister of education to call for a reduction in queer characters on television, as they were believed to provide poor role models for children. The rationale was that any representation on television, because of its glamorous associations, would be emulated. This positions queerness as simultaneously fashionable and contagious.
However, North Americans or Europeans would not consider these representations “positive” portrayals. Typically, kathoey and effeminate gay men are cast as comic relief characters or as criminals with lives mired in tragedy, not unlike historical American images of sissies, drag queens, and other queers. While contemporary Thai images of queers on television should not be read as historically backward, such imagery counters any claims that Thais express no negative sentiment about homosexuality and transgenderism.

These media are constructing diverse and contradictory images of gay and kathoey. Television and film producers are creating more complex and varied representations of gay and kathoey on their own accord. In the summer of 2009, the Rainbow Moon (พระจันทร์สีรุ้ง phrachantha sirung) drama series focused on a storyline in which a kathoey raises a child. To give the son a better life, she sacrifices her transgender identity by reverting to living as an effeminate man. Thai commercial and public television have entertainment programs and talk shows hosted by gays and kathoey. Kathoey increasingly participate as guests on talk shows, not as entertainers but as activists, researchers, and transgender rights advocates. The transsexual celebrity Nok Yollada sells diamonds on cable television. Television and print news incorporate queer content, typically controversies about the excesses of effeminate male behavior. These stories act to discipline queerness and warn the general population about its dangers. When kathoey appear in the news, the theme is generally crime or the bizarre. The year 2009 produced controversies about inappropriate sexual behavior and sex work between monk novices and older monks and kathoey, effeminate Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) students who lure their peers into unseemly acts, and flamboyant monk novices. The novice monk behavior deemed inappropriate included wearing false eyelashes, using blush and lipstick, and tying monk’s robes to produce empire and kimono-style waistlines. Such controversies produce national identity as it is articulated through a reinforcement of traditionalized religion and morality, thereby policing gender expression and sexuality based on a heteronormative standard.

Kathoey are simultaneously portrayed as ugly and beautiful, traditional and modern, backward and cosmopolitan.

As the U.S. market for international gay films has grown in the past decade, many queer North Americans have come into contact with representations of Thai queerness through Thai films. These films generally represent Thailand as tolerant of homosexuality and transgenderism. Yet the stories often mask the complexity of the films’ local reception and queer Thai lived experience. With films such as Iron Ladies (2000), Beautiful Boxer (2003), and Tropical Malady (2003) playing in art cinemas in the United States and others, such as Bangkok Love
Story (2007) and Love of Siam (2007), available on DVD, Thailand is represented as a fantastic place where even transgender women are able to become national men’s sports champions. The teen romance Love of Siam won Best Picture in all major Thai awards that year and was submitted by Thailand for consideration at the 2009 Academy Awards. These critical accolades, however, are attenuated by the film’s popular reception. Many Thai viewers took offense at the boy-boy love story. Advertisements for the movie featured two heterosexual couples with no hint that the boys would become paired. When Love of Siam was broadcast on Thai cable television, the kissing scene between the boys was cut, but subsequently, the censored kissing scene proliferated via many postings on YouTube. Many Thai gay men relate specifically to Love of Siam because they consider its ending realistic: family takes precedence over a romantic relationship. The boys are not coupled in the end. Even the feel good, wildly popular, “based on a true story” Iron Ladies, the second-highest grossing movie of all time in Thailand at the time of its release, occludes the eventual real-life outcome. Stating that they would have to prove that they were really men, the secretary-general of the Volleyball Association of Thailand disqualified team members who were not deemed masculine enough from international competition, as this would embarrass the nation. Gender and sexuality are indeed objects of governmental and media control and discipline. The representation of Thai masculinity and the national pride associated with it is at stake in these controversies.

Without access to information about their local reception and the realities of queer lived experience, these films can be read like documentaries of exotic, faraway places. Viewing the queer Thai films available in the United States, audiences are led to imagine a land of unparalleled gay and transgender social acceptance. Additionally, the Thai films that U.S. audiences see are already filtered through international art and queer cinematic lenses. Approximately 10 percent of commercially released Thai films are queer-themed or feature queer characters. Yet a large proportion of Thai queer films are never distributed abroad. Many of these, such as 2009’s Sassy Players (แต๋วเตะตีนระเบิด Taew Te Teen Rabert: literally, sissies kicking with explosive feet), about a group of queeny boys who play soccer (a high school version of the Iron Ladies) or Haunting Me (หอแต๋วแตกแหกกระเจิง Hor Taew Taek Haek Krajerng: literally, sissy dorm shattered, sissies scattered), both directed by Poj Arnon, would be considered stereotypical and offensive by Western standards. However, they are popular both with mainstream and with queer audiences. Thus, while there is an extensive range of queer media, the sheer volume masks both the complexity of the content, its reception, and the varied discourses around its circulation. Portrayals that seem
socially enlightened from afar can actually be either mundane or controversial. Male-bodied effeminacy can be displayed on-screen for a laugh, but such characters should not come to represent the nation.

**Wonder Gay: We’re Already Too Gay**

The production, consumption, and contestation over queer representation in Thailand shows the regulatory pressure placed on gender expression and same-sex eroticism. Thais are keenly sensitive about being seen as “too gay” by the rest of the world. Wonder Gay provides a particularly salient example from 2009 that exemplifies the limited acceptability of male effeminacy in popular Thai discourse and how Thai national identity is articulated through discourses of gender and sexuality.

The Wonder Girls are an award-winning South Korean girl band that swept the charts in many Asian countries. They were the first Korean group listed on *Billboard*’s Hot 100. The Wonder Gay is a group of five Thai high school students whose impersonation of the Wonder Girls catapulted them to celebrity status in Thailand. In their viral YouTube video, the Wonder Gay lip-synch and dance to the Wonder Girls song “Nobody.” Each member of Wonder Gay copies the movements and takes on the persona of one of the Wonder Girls. Garnering approximately one-third as many hits as the official Wonder Girls’ “Nobody” YouTube video, the Wonder Gay’s “Nobody—Ouz Wonder Girls (cover)” video is the most popular YouTube video from Thailand to date. Wonder Gay discussions are prevalent on many Thai Web discussion boards, both mainstream and queer. In general, Web forum threads tend to start positively, with early adopter fans posting enthusiastic comments. But as the threads progress and the audience grows, the comments become more critical.

The Thai television interview with the Wonder Gay on *เจาะข่าวเด่น* (*Jao Khaow Den*, Breaking News) starts with opening text scrolling onto the screen. After noting that 1,300,000 people have seen the Wonder Gay “Nobody” video, Wonder Gay are referred to as the “Third Gender Wave” (*กระแสเพศที่ 3, krasae phet thi 3*) using terminology reminiscent of the “Korean Wave” (*กระแสเกาหลี krasae kao li*). The host then begins the program by making the following statement:

This is an interview with a group of high school students that one day wore their school uniforms and used a school stage to perform a dance using the Wonder Girls’ song “Nobody,” and they posted the clip on YouTube. The Susan Boyle clip was seen by more than 150,000 people. But this group’s
clip was seen by more than 1,300,000. Their clip has been posted since last February. There is something special that draws people to watch this clip. And now, a music company has asked them to be singers. So some people accept this hot topic, others are against it. They are good students and have good exam scores. Society is already more open but some people ask why they behave this way. And this may lead others to copy them.26

The opening statement highlights the social concerns of Wonder Gay’s critics, namely, that they are inappropriately representing Thai-ness (i.e., performing in school uniforms on a school stage in front of a flagpole, flamboyantly) and that their popularity will encourage other boys to become effeminate/homosexual like them.

After the introduction, the interview shifts to the members’ academic performance. All members of the Wonder Gay have a GPA of over 3.0. Thus they are established as good students, which suggests that they are moral teenagers and that they can be good role models.27 The members emphasize that they are not addicted to drugs or involved in other deviant behavior. But the focus on academic performance as a measure of “goodness” presumes that their effeminacy makes them already corrupt; the result is the policing of Thai masculinity. The host then concludes with the statement: “This group is still young. They don’t look very mature like in their clip. They just get together and do what they like, and now it depends on society whether to accept them or not.”

Online, however, reception of the Wonder Gay video follows a different logic. In Thai forums the response increasingly shifts from congratulatory to disapproving as the audience broadens. The same pattern is observed on YouTube. I elaborate on the comments written by Thais on YouTube because they specifically address an international audience as opposed to a national one.28 By October 14, 2009, there were 2,949 YouTube comments on the Wonder Gay’s initial “Nobody” clip. These comments are overwhelmingly favorable (the clip has a 4.5 out of 5 rating based on 2,754 ratings), yet the critical comments, as might be expected, stand out. Wonder Gay’s dancing and singing ability, their gender presentation, and their appropriateness as representatives of Thailand constitute the main issues. However, it is also important to note that they are, as a queer phenomenon, attractive because of their difference, which is often interpreted as humorous and entertaining. Their “strange” behavior is what garners attention. In this sense, they commodify the novelty of Thai gender difference to sell their music.29

Thais constitute the early consumers of the “Nobody” video clip. As the clip’s popularity increases, the audience becomes more global. Internationaliza-
tion of the audience brings to the fore issues of national representation, and Wonder Gay’s queerness is the primary concern. Much of the YouTube commentary points to the reputation of Thailand as a country with an exceedingly large gay and transgender population. The following exchange from YouTube comments discusses Thailand’s reputation for being gay and the role of queers as entertainers.

IHyraxi -4
yeah thai kids are known to be gay. did you know there the tranny capital of the world?
i mean come on how could these boys actually do this?? for a girl ok, but highschool biys?? just wow . . .

ThaisouljaBoi 0
u got caught hating again dawg lol come on now.. lol u dont like these fags or u do.. whatever . . . let it go lol me persoanlly dont really like these kinda people that much, but i dont say shit to them. You said u dont hate all Thais, so come on dawg, do what u said. Be an example

IHyraxi -1
ahahaha come lol i knew youd see this comemnt anyways but i jsut ahd to say somthin cuz it was so gay lol!!!! haha
i know not all thai ppl are gay, jsut these kids are so funny though hahaha

ThaisouljaBoi 0
well keep it on the low, that will be good. Come on, i know u dont like people makin fun of u, do u ? lol
but anyway, these kinda people r like jukebox for us, so its good to have them around, just something to laugh at.30

Here ThaiSouljaBoy defends the Wonder Gay because they are Thai. While acknowledging their queer presence, he nominally accepts them for their entertainment value, as objects of ridicule.

The representation of gay and kathoey in media that are accessible abroad, such as film and online sources, influences how Thais come to see their country as well as its status for outsiders. For example, labchaeong states: “after watching this vid i realise why thailand never develop [sic].”31 That is, excessive male effeminacy and the lack of talent of the performers are associated with an inability to progress as a nation. Wonder Gay are controversial not only as queers but also as Korean imitators.32 Thai popular music and other media borrow heavily from the West. However, copying the East, and in such a wide-scale fashion, reignites anxieties about the loss of Thai-ness (ความเป็นไทย khwampenthai). Because the Wonder Gay are situated as a Thai sissy group, they come to represent a nation
that is already overly queered, and one that can only mimic others without producing anything original. They become a source of national shame.

The Politics of Pride: The Censure and Contest over Visible Evidence

While the Wonder Gay case exemplifies the limits of acceptable representation on the Web, the contestation of queer visibility also occurs in everyday life. One example of such anxiety erupting in the political arena is in Red Shirt (National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship, or UDD) politics, when queers became a target of Red Shirt protest.33 Chiang Mai’s second gay pride march in 2009 was violently disrupted by Red Shirt protesters and others, who claimed that Lanna (northern Thai) culture does not support such displays. Red Shirt rhetoric excises queerness from local tradition, even though some kathoey trace their origins to the Lanna tradition. Red Shirt propaganda also portrays current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and other political leaders as kathoey to discredit them (see figs. 1 and 2). Such moves do not deny the existence of gays/kathoey in UDD politics. Gays/kathoey were active protesters in the rallies, and kathoey entertain-
GLQ: A JOURNAL OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES

Figure 2. Red Shirt protest encampment in Bangkok, April 18, 2010; photo by Käng. Poster, one of many in a series displayed as an art exhibit satirizing Thai politicians as queer, portrays the prime minister as a *kathoey* sex worker: “Daddy [slang for an old, fat, rich man who likes to have sex with young girls/boys; probably a reference to General Prem Tinsulanonda, the sixteenth prime minister of Thailand, who is widely rumored to be gay and the mastermind of the 2006 coup] come, help Mark [Abhisit’s English name]! It’ll slip through the prime minister’s fingers soon.” This idiomatically means the prime minister will lose his position soon. The sticker reads: “Abhisit Murderer.”

performers performed at the main stage at Ratchaprasong during the encampment at that area in March–May 2010. Kathoey who preened and posed for pictures in front of the Louis Vuitton store just next to the main stage did not fear reproach. Rather, the Red Shirts use homosexuality/transgenderism as a tactic of political shaming. That is, while individuals are allowed to act out their queerness, the concept of queerness is still illegitimate. English-language news reports generally portray the Red Shirts as the rural poor, ignoring the complexity of the UDD constituency. These reports also did not cover the political use of queer imagery and therefore do not impinge on foreigners’ views of gay/kathoey representation. Thus an image of unequivocal Thai acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism is preserved.

The UDD protests are not the only venue in which queerness is made politically visible. In Bangkok, clashes among activists, community organizations, and
commercial interests have put the “pride” march, which incorporates Thais and foreigners, on hiatus. Yet there is an annual “human rights” march, with related events focusing on the Thai queer community, that takes place during the last weekend in November. In 2009 the march occurred in Siam Square, in the heart of Bangkok’s shopping district on a Saturday afternoon. Simultaneously, male and transgender sex workers staged a condom fashion show at Hua Lamphong, Bangkok’s central train station. Earlier that same morning, a forum including a former Human Rights Commission officer on the topic of กะเทยห้ามเข้า (Kathoey Ham Khao: No entry for kathoey) was attended by approximately two hundred participants (see fig. 3). The next day, a festival commemorating World AIDS Day and human rights for sexual minorities brought all these groups and other organizations together in Chatuchak Park. This festival occurred on the footpath between the sky train station and Chatuchak Weekend Market, perhaps the busiest area in Bangkok on a Sunday afternoon. Although gay pride events have ended in Bangkok and were disrupted in Chiang Mai in 2009, they still continue in Pattaya and Phuket. Expressions of queer pride are both suppressed and supported, contingent
on local politics and circumstances. Yet the UDD use of transgender imagery for political defamation clearly points to the disgrace that can be evoked by gender nonconformity. As Peter Jackson argues, the Thai situation can best be described as “tolerant but unaccepting.”

Paradise: Lost, Found, and Reinvented

The notion of a prelapsarian “gay paradise” in Bangkok is clearly limited, but not entirely unfounded. The complex situation of queer representation in Bangkok points to how thoroughly portrayals of Thai gender and sexuality have been constructed through the sometimes contradictory forces of anticolonial rhetoric, politics, tourism, commodity flows, and other forms of transculturation. Analysis of Thai media shows that there are intense social anxieties about queerness and its relationship to the national body. There is great concern, in a country overdetermined by sex tourism and male-bodied effeminacy, about how the nation appears to non-Thais. Thus foreign portrayals of Thailand as a “gay paradise” may unintentionally incite animosity toward gay/kathoey, who, in their excessive sexualization, are seen to defame the nation. Ironically, the portrayal of “gay paradise” may indeed call for the suppression of the very groups that supposedly make Thailand a paradise. Nevertheless, queer Thais themselves refer to the situation as “better here than elsewhere.” If you ask Thais why there are so many gay/kathoey, the typical answer is that “we accept them.” After all, why do so many Western and East Asian gay men come here? Why has Bangkok become the capital of gender-transformation surgery? The economic imbalance that makes Thailand a bargain is key. However, social tolerance toward homosexuality and transgenderism is clearly another primary factor for gay and transgender travelers. The visibility of queerness is high and rarely attracts negative attention. Though there are few legal rights granted to queers (e.g., kathoey cannot change their sex on national identity cards), social tolerance for them makes life relatively easy compared with the situation in other countries. Transgenderism and effeminacy are seen as more humorous and “cute” than “sick” or deranged. Compared with East Asian cultures, in Thailand there is less pressure to marry and have sons. Even if one cannot be “open” or “reveal” oneself verbally (เปิดเผย poethphoei), one can “show” (แสดงออก sadaeng ok) oneself visually with little condemnation and live a queer life relatively comfortably. Thai queers say that their situation is better than that of their Asian neighbors.

New geopolitical alignments are also structuring queer subjectivities and cultural trajectories. With increasing economic development and Asian region-
alism, there is an increasing shift away from the West. Rather than a unifying teleological force, globalization and modernization also produce local difference. For example, new non-Western sexual subjectivities in Bangkok, such as “tom” and “dee,” are produced through the same market mechanisms that create “global gays.” Indeed, a gender-based model of same-sex female sexuality, which is constructed against local understandings of Western lesbianism, has developed throughout Southeast Asia and Greater China. While some critics have suggested that the situation in queer Asia is like that of the United States in the past, the Thai situation is not behind developmentally but rather a different articulation of queer modernity. Indeed, Thai gay cultures evolved concurrently with Western ones, not after them. Contrary to global gay predictions, gender-stratified kathoey have proliferated alongside globally identified gay men. One major difference from the West is in the relative visibility of kathoey compared with gay men. In fact, gayness is said not to “show” the way that being kathoey usually does. With the growing use of surgical procedures among kathoey, however, their visibility decreases as they increasingly pass. As Thai gender and sexuality work through and alongside different cultural logics, evolutionary comparisons with the West are both inadequate and faulty.

Queer Thais themselves, especially those from the middle classes, are creating distinctive desires that are meaningful for them within the context of a middle-income country striving to join the developed world. New consumptive practices and partnership patterns position queer Thais as desiring subjects for whom the Western ideological framework of egalitarian homosexuality takes a backseat to neoliberal economics and their countercurrents. Depictions of sex tourism in particular have shaped how middle-class Thais increasingly display cosmopolitanism by avoiding personal relationships with farang. The Internet, regional flows of media, and a rise in regional travel made possible by discount airlines have simultaneously made East Asians desirable and accessible romantic partners. Middle-class Thai gay men often avoid white partners, and other Thais, in staking a claim to an Asian gay cosmopolitan identity. They profess a desire for East Asian partners, and particularly those from wealthier countries. For whom, to what extent, and in what manner is Bangkok a paradise? The answer is that paradise itself does not exist, and paradise is relative to one’s social positioning. For many queer Thais, expatriates, and tourists, however, Bangkok is as close as a city gets to being one.
Notes

1. See www.magazinedee.com/main/magpreview.php?id=6535. In general Thai usage, "kathoey" (กะเทย) refers to anyone with nonnormative gender presentation or sexuality, or any variation beyond heterosexual male or female. Here it is used, as in Bangkok, to refer specifically to male-to-female transgender persons. I use the term “ladyboy,” which is a common English translation of “kathoey,” only when it occurs in original text sources, as some kathoey consider it offensive.

Nouns from Thai are not modified to express plural form, thus the plural of “kathoey” is “kathoey.” Unless a common or preferred transliteration exists, all renderings of Thai in roman alphabet use the Royal Thai General System. All translations are mine.

This article focuses on gay and kathoey populations in Bangkok, which have relatively little interaction with tom. (These populations have greater interaction outside of Bangkok.) Additionally, much information about gays and kathoey is available because of HIV-related research and their common classification as MSM in public health discourses.

MSM is a public health term that includes gay-identified men and youth, bisexual males (males who have sex with males and females), male-to-female transgenders, male partners of transgenders, male sex workers, and other males who engage in same-sex sexual activity.

2. See www.magazinedee.com/main/magpreview.php?id=6599. In this article, there is no lexical differentiation made between the English “gay” and the Thai loan “เกย์” (ke), which some scholars italicize (gay) to highlight the different meanings and conceptualizations of the word. “Gay” here, and in Thai usage refers only to males. In Thai and other Southeast Asian languages, “gay” is used as an adjective or as a noun. (In this article I use an unitalicized “gay” for convenience.) Worapoj was temporarily barred from boxing for his Stage modeling.

3. “Tom” refers to masculine women who engage in same-sex relationships. Their counterparts are “dee,” feminine women in relationships with “tom.” The terms are derived from the English “tomboy” and “lady.”

4. Third-World women are often equated with the natural resources of a holiday destination. Kathoey images for tourists not only naturalize them as local resources but additionally work to construct Thailand as exotic, having a “third” gender.

5. Farang is the term Thais generally use for white foreigners. Like kathoey, it can be used as a slur.

6. Approximately 90 percent of Thais practice Theravada Buddhism.

7. Thais rarely refer to themselves as “queer.” I use it here as a convenient umbrella term for nonnormative gender presentation and same-sex eroticism. Thai academics use the term as in the West.
8. In much of the gay foreigner discourse, Thai males are generally referred to as “boys.” The “ladyboy” market is primarily targeted toward heterosexually identified men. Listings of kathoey go-go bars appear within lists of female go-go bars. Kathoey bars are generally not included in lists of gay bars or male go-go bars.

9. Though East Asians probably constitute a larger population of sex tourists to Thailand than white Westerners, being seen in public with another Asian is generally not stigmatizing. Other Asians can be interpreted as friends, while farang are more likely coded as sexual partners.

10. I have argued elsewhere that a critique of “rice queens” and sex tourists ignores their local circumstances. They are often marginalized from their communities of origin because of their attractiveness, body size, age, and other characteristics (Dredge Byung’chu Käng, “Reconsidering the Rice Queen” [paper presented at Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies, Bangkok, Thailand, July 7–9, 2005]; Käng, “Beauty and Its Other: Body as Resource, Sex Tourist as Foil” [paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico, April 5–10, 2005]).


14. One bias when looking at forums on sites such as thaivisa.com is that they are skewed toward retirees who are receiving their pensions in Thailand. Retirement visas are among the easiest visas to obtain in Thailand.

15. Nicknames for Bangkok include “Sin City.”


18. Various studies have estimated 3–17 percent of young men in Thailand are MSM. The estimates for the number of MSM are based on behavioral surveys, primarily of military recruits from the northern provinces. There is no estimate for the size of the self-identified gay population. Estimates for the population of Bangkok range from 6 to 12 million (The Thai census is conducted via household registration, and approximately half the city population is not registered as living in Bangkok). These values create a range of between 90,000 and 1,020,000 MSM in Bangkok. The estimate for kathoey in Bangkok is extrapolated from venue-time sampling at shopping malls. See

19. The Association of South East Asian Nations is a political organization of Southeast Asian countries that is increasingly developing economic ties with Japan, Korea, and China.

20. The Korean Wave or Hallyu refers to the immense popularity of Korean mass media (i.e., television drama series, pop music, film) and popular culture in Asia and other parts of the globe.

21. Ara Wilson has called for studies that highlight the regional influences that Asian nations exert on each other rather than position Asia as a recipient of flows from the West (Ara Wilson, “Queering Asia,” Intersections: Gender, History, and Culture in the Asian Context 14 [2006]: intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html). Existing accounts of Thai gender pluralism and same-sex eroticism focus on the interaction between autochthonous, national, and Western influences. Little is known about the impact of East Asian capital, media, and tourism on Thai gender and sexuality. Yet the examples cited above clearly demonstrate that East Asia is a significant source of Thai queer modernity.


23. This latter story was brought to the attention of the media by the Task Force for the Preservation of Civilization, including the prominent and controversial gay activist Natee Teerarojanapongs. From Natee’s perspective, such behavior both demeans traditional religious institutions and portrays gays negatively, as immoral and irresponsible citizens.

24. Thailand has a long history of disciplining gender. Early efforts to prevent Western colonization included the transformation of Thai gender to meet the expectations of Western civilization, as transforming barbaric gender and sexual practices was one of the justifications for colonization (Peter A. Jackson, “Performative Genders, Perverse Desires: A Bio-History of Thailand’s Same-Sex and Transgender Cultures,” Intersections: Gender, History, and Culture in the Asian Context 9 [2003]: intersections.anu.edu.au/issue9/jackson.html); Penny van Esterik, Materializing Thailand [Oxford: Berg, 2000]).

25. There are, of course, gays and kathoey who find such representations offensive. As few of the actors are gay, their gay performances are exaggerated. However, the vast majority of viewers, whether queer or not, find these representations humorous and fun, nothing requiring serious examination.

26. My translation. The figure for the Susan Boyle clip given by the reporter seems too low. However, multiple versions of clips are often posted on YouTube, and thus the statistic given might refer to a clip that was not Boyle’s most popular clip.
27. There is also a stereotype that gays are smarter and better behaved in school than heterosexual boys.

28. YouTube comments are left in English, Thai, Thaiglish (identifiable through online idioms such as “555” [i.e., ha ha ha] or a phonetic rendition of Thai in Roman alphabet), Tagalog, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

29. For a discussion of the commodification of kathoey in selling products, see Prempreeda Pramoj Na Ayuttaya, “The Kathoey as a Product” (2003), web.hku.hk/~sjwinter/TransgenderASIA/paper_the_kathoey_as_a_product(thai).htm; also available in English at web.hku.hk/~sjwinter/TransgenderASIA/paper_the_kathoey_as_a_product.htm.

30. Text from YouTube is reproduced exactly as rendered online, and all spelling and grammatical mistakes have been retained. I have removed the dates of the comments and the voting links. The number following the handle of the poster represents the positive or negative votes the comment received.

31. The profile for labchaeong identifies him/her as from Afghanistan, but the fact that the profile is written in Thai suggests that the author is either Thai or Thai living abroad.

32. Wonder Gay follow other Thai imitators of K-pop, such as the all-kathoey group Venus Flytrap, modeled after the transgender Korean group Lady and the girl band 7 Days, modeled after the Korean girl band Girls’ Generation. Such mimicry questions Thai originality at the same time that it poses a competition between countries. Most Thais do not realize that the Wonder Girls’ song “Nobody” re-creates a Motown aesthetic.

33. The Red Shirts are a populist political organization composed mostly of the rural and urban poor that support former Prime Minister Thaksin. They claim the current administration came into power illegitimately and thus call for the dissolution of the government and new elections.

34. Ratchaprasong is the name of the intersection of Rama I and Ratchadamri Roads. The Red Shirt camp was centered at this intersection, where the main stage was set up. This intersection is also the center of high-end shopping in Bangkok.

35. Many commercial establishments, especially hotels and night clubs, do not admit kathoey. The rationale is that they are sex workers or thieves who will steal from other guests.


37. Thais often refer to queerness as something that is more acceptable in Thailand than elsewhere. Typically, they will say that Thais ยอมรับ (yom rap: accept) homosexuality and transgenderism while other countries are ปิด (pit: closed, concealed) or queers there must be อับอาย (apai: ashamed). However, this refers specifically to everyday life and the openness one can show in publicly displaying male-bodied effeminacy. Thais often believe that queers have more rights overseas, for example,
the right to marry. This is often exaggerated. For example, some believe that same-sex marriage exists throughout the United States rather than in specific states.

38. As in other parts of Asia, there is not an emphasis on “coming out” in Thailand. However, unlike more Confucianist East Asian societies, there is less emphasis on hiding one’s gender and sexual nonconformity. For kathoey, transgenderism is generally made visible via sartorial practice, cosmetic use, bodily comportment, and language (Thai uses gendered particles that mark the speaker as male or female). Effeminate gay Thais (who generally would not describe themselves as “men”) will often state that everyone knows about their sexual orientation, even if they have told no one.


42. Stephen O. Murray’s taxonomy of homosexualities describes modern Western homosexuality as egalitarian in that both partners are more or less equal in status and similar in gender presentation, compared with other systems in which age difference, gender-transformation, or other factors structure homosexuality (Stephen O. Murray, *Homosexualities* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000]).

43. At least in central Bangkok, one could argue that tom and dee are more visible than gay men, in that they are often seen holding hands as couples. Typically, couples are easily identifiable, as one woman will have long hair and be very feminine while the other will have short hair and masculine gender presentation. They are, however, generally not considered threatening to normative gender the same way that male same-sex couples are, as female same-sex sexuality is referred to as a kind of “play.” Same-sex male couples rarely hold hands or are affectionate in public.


46. Perhaps in reaction to the representation of Thailand as a “gay paradise,” particularly
in popular literature, academics have emphasized the faultiness of such a portrayal, pointing to the complex and contradictory nature of homosexuality and transgender-ism in Thailand. The academic literature focuses on negative events and aspects of intolerance to sexual diversity. However, queer Thais themselves, especially kathoey, typically frame their situation in Thailand as better than in other countries.

DOI 10.1215/10642684-2010-028