ABSTRACT

This essay examines emerging transgender and transsexual identities in Thailand in terms of their historical, cultural and political footings, paying special attention to the diversity and fluidity of sexual practices in the context of Thailand’s sex tourism industry. While the term “queer” is not used in Thailand, the essay demonstrates that it does not capture the culturally specific, existing or emerging diversity of a “third gender”, a conception that is also different from and absent in predominant academic discourses on transgender. The research uses data based on interviews with workers in the Thai sex tourism industry, arguing that local processes remain powerful forces for cultural transformation and are important to both new forms of sex-cultural difference, as well as to the transnational convergences of tourism, medical technology and neoliberal governance in Thailand’s sexual cultures. The essay demonstrates how these identities are, on the one hand, tolerated or legitimized by local belief systems, and on the other hand facilitated or restricted by available medical technologies, as well as crucially steered by the demands of the Thai sex and tourism industry.

Recent transgender scholarship has bemoaned the shallow and reductive portrayal in the US media of gender liminal people in non-Western societies. Towle and Morgan note that Euro-American transgender activists frequently invoke the ubiquity of non-Western “third gender” peoples in order to prove transgender universality and thereby bolster transgender legitimacy at home (563). In so doing, they conflate the concept of third gender with transgender. Roen doubts that Euro-American transgender theory
can be made to fit the lives of gender liminal people in non-Western cultures; by subsuming them, Euro-American theory colonizes and degrades them (196). Yet beyond the recognition of such shortcomings or unverified assumptions, transgender scholarship has not yet adequately addressed how the reality of diverse gender practices and identities should, in fact, be accessed, or with which vocabularies they ought to be described. This essay examines emerging transgender and transsexual identities in Thailand in their historical, cultural and political contexts in order to offer an embodied perspective on how the transnational and the cross-cultural impact on local, material formations of subjectivities. The essay traces the trajectory of “queerness” in Thailand by way of a two-fold investigation. First, the essay provides an exploration of terminology and of the worldviews, from which vocabularies around sexuality are derived, as well as an assessment of the problems in searching for cross-cultural equivalences in gender conceptions. Second, the essay presents a series of observations based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two key sites of Thailand’s sex tourism industry. These observations relate to transgender and transsexual identities and practices, very specifically in terms of how they are embodied and experienced in the material realities and labor conditions of sex workers. To what extent do both these fields of analysis, i.e. the diversity of terminology and the diversity of identities and practices, in fact, indicate any alternative sexual formations? To what extent are they re-inscribed into very fixed binaries, governed by the globalization of sexuality in the tourism and medical industries?

**Naming the third gender in Thailand**

In Thai culture, a third gender category has always existed alongside the categories “male” and “female”; the third gender is read as neither male nor female, even though the person’s genitals may be readily classifiable (Ocha 563). This is not equivalent to the term “transgender”, which implicitly assumes a gender binary; people may change genders but they have not historically been considered a third gender (Lorber 145). The use of the term “transgender” in reference to the third gender thus reduces three to two. Further complicating the cross-cultural terrain is modern medical technology with its terminology. Now people in the third gender category are able to change their bodies, but “sex reassignment” refers to changing from one sex to another; semantically, three are again reduced to two (Ocha and Earth 196).

The term *kathoey* is used to describe transgender or third gender but the term transgender does not carry the specifics of sexual subcultures attached to *kathoey*. Winter argues that Thailand lacks single words that correspond to the English words “transgender” and “transsexual” (14). From a Thai perspective, it might be more accurate to say that neither of the English terms corresponds to the complex meanings of *kathoey* in Thailand, the most common word for male-to-female transgender is *kathoey*. Historically, the term refers to hermaphrodites, and since the twentieth century, the