

ผู้หญิงรักผู้หญิง



Women Who Love Women

Towards a New Paradigm of Cross-Cultural Gender Theory

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First of all, thank you all for coming. I just want to say, please ask me questions, interrupt me. I have some pictures displayed on my laptop, and I would like this to be an informal presentation.

How It Began

I would like to begin by explaining how I came to the idea for my undergraduate thesis. From August 14, 2006 until August 15, 2007, I lived in Thailand. I left the United States as a twenty-six year old *queer* Pagan English major and came back a very different person indeed. I was still *queer* (although I had become more comfortable using the word *lesbian*) but I had gained some Buddhist insights and realized I was not an English major anymore. I decided to roll my former major and three minors—Philosophy, Asian Studies, and Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies—into a self-designed major entitled “[Con]textualizing Gender: An Analysis of Gender in the Global Community.” My experiences in Thailand, as multiple, crazy, and diverse as they were, had given me a clearer direction academically, albeit at the late date of my super-senior year.

Because of the focus of my major, I engaged in a *metaethical linguistic philosophy*—a practice that is embodied apart and away from patriarchal structures of preeminent male-referents working from a Queer methodology on performed/constructed sexual orientations/preferences, gender expressions, and identity formations and power/knowledge interplays within key terms. But it was not until I had traveled to Thailand that I could fully realize my goal of an international focus and comparative inquiry.

Prior to living in Thailand, I had comfortably identified as *queer*, but as I soon found out, in Thailand there is no Thai word with the same meaning and the English word is unknown in its current reclaimed usage. I encountered a *Dilemma of Language*, a linguistic lacuna, wherein I was not able to locate my identity. I felt like my identity was being erased—if the word I used to describe myself did not exist and the concept behind that word of an amorphous non-normative identification was non-existent, then how was I to explain to people who/what I am? When explaining to people that I was not

attracted to males, what words should I use? I quickly discovered *toms* (ทอม) and *dees* (ดี้); they were explained to me as closely approximating the American identities of *butch* and *femme*. While at that time I had never imagined myself in those terms, I did not think the *toms* (ทอม) and *dees* (ดี้) I saw and interacted with were actually similar to *butches* and *femmes*. I decided to investigate. As my Thai vocabulary increased and I encountered questions regarding whether or not I had a *fan* (แฟน)—a non-gendered word for boyfriend or girlfriend—I felt compelled to explain that I preferred to date women. But not everyone understood *lesbian*, and I was told the term had some negative connotations. Now what? My hair was too long to be a *tom* (ทอม), I was not exactly comfortable appropriating *dee* (ดี้), and I was not even sure I liked the word *lesbian*. Then I discovered the term *women who love women* (ผู้หญิงรักผู้หญิง). The seed of an idea for this project was planted.

The subtitle of this project is *Towards a New Paradigm of Cross-Cultural Gender Theory*. I have attempted to not only outline a *transcultural* way of looking at gender in a global context but to then apply my theories to specific examples of cross-cultural comparison—namely *toms* (ทอม) and *dees* (ดี้) in Thailand and *butches* and *femmes* in America. The foundation of my theorizations regarding gender is an attention to matters of linguistic accuracy. Words, like identities, are not static but dynamic, fluid, and are undergoing a constant negotiation of meaning. Thus words can never once and for all be defined, nor can meanings be assumed to be consistent within the culture of any particular word's origination.

In exploring terms used to describe women engaged in same-sex sexual practices (s³p), I will be discussing many terms; however, my primary focus is on the two perceived female couplings of *butch/femme* in an American context and *tom/dee* (ทอมดี้) in a Thai context. There is persistence among Westerners and urban Thais not only in equating the two sets of terms—seeing them as essentially the same—but also in positing *toms* (ทอม) and *dees* (ดี้) as the Thai versions of the Western/American *butch*

and *femme*, somehow secondary to or imitative of this more familiar binary. However, in this project I outline the numerous problems with this overly simplistic interpretation of Thai expressions of gender and sexual orientations/preferences.

Change in Direction

Originally, I was going to talk about butches, femmes, **ทอม**, and **ดี้**. I was going to talk about the differences, socially and linguistically. But in starting to talk about the differences in language—that you can't rip words out of one cultural context, shove them into another, and expect them to function in exactly the same way—I realized that the ideas were different too.

The way I think about gender and sexual orientations/preferences are contingent on my context as a Hispanic, lesbian, American, female-identified woman¹ situated in academia. Not only did I find myself confronted with fashioning new terminology but also the need to critically engage my ideas, conceptualize a new methodology, and construct a new paradigm of cross-cultural gender theory.

Can of Worms

As a product of a liberal arts education, I found myself not well grounded in any particular methodology or discipline but knowing a little bit about everything. As a result, I formed a queer methodology, in the non-normative sense of the word, and picked and chose what I thought would be helpful to my inquiry, allowing my research to take me into whatever field I deemed would be enlightening to my analysis. Consequently, my methodological approach is comprised of Three Strands:

- Anthropological
 - Experiences in Thailand
 - Survey Data
- Theoretical

¹ Note: A “female-identified woman” is analogous with the term “cisgendered”; however, at the time of writing my thesis, I was completely unaware of this term.

- **Michel Foucault** – The Gaze, Panopticon, Internalization of Institutional efforts at control, and Construction of Homosexual
- **Judith Butler** – Performance, Gender as Drag, Lack of Pre-performative Self
- **Judith Halberstam** – Breaking down masculinity as a privilege of male bodies
- **Anne Fausto-Sterling & Milton Diamond** – Exposing biological gender as a social construction
- **Peter Jackson** – Thai gender/sex systems and the Thai discourse of *phet* (เพศ)
- **Megan Sinnott** – Writing specifically on her research on ทอมดี้
- Spiritual
 - Buddhism
 - Daoism
 - Pagan spirituality

My Paradigm

In formulating my paradigm, I struggled with issues of Academic Imperialism, a need for fluidity, and contextualization. My somewhat formulaic five-fold paradigm calls for a contextualization of yourself—the scholar, the researcher, the activist—acknowledging intellectual and ideological biographies, a challenging of and negotiation with hegemonic structures of academia/theory/epistemologies in an effort to transculture theory, a grasp of the local and a determination of *social stay places*, and finally an attentiveness to language and the dangers of academic imperialism.

Butler and Buddha

One example of my attempt at transculturating theory is my approach to Butler and Buddha and the issue of performance. Judith Butler explains that the combination of the insistence on heterosexuality's naturalness and originality with the documented emergence of homosexual identity

produces a relationship wherein heterosexuality has a necessary dependence on homosexuality as a way to define itself. In other words, the identification of the Other (*homosexuality*) is necessary in order to define the primary referent (*heterosexuality*), which is touted as *normal*; definition occurs by defining what heterosexuality is not, and homosexuality is defined in opposition to the hegemonic ideal of heterosexuality. This dependence of heterosexuality on homosexual identity exposes the constructedness of human sexuality.

Additionally, “heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and *failing* (Butler, *Imitation* 21).² This “phantasmatic idealization” is produced through *discourse* and is unattainable in any concrete way. Nobody lives up to the standards or remains within the bounds of constructed ideals. Heterosexuality must be repeated, copied, over and over again in an attempt to establish, institutionalize, circulate, and confirm itself, but that very repetition exposes the instability of the classification (Butler, *Imitation* 18). Within the naturalized paradigm of heterosexuality, biological gender, social gender, and desire are postulated as having continuity; i.e., social gender is constructed as an extension of biological gender and fully and appropriately realized within the confines of heterosexuality (Butler, *Imitation* 27). Thus gender is constructed as being within the heterosexual matrix: ideas of man and woman are dependent on a heterosexual referent. But as homosexuality debunks the myth of original heterosexuality, the relationship between heterosexuality and gender betrays the construction of gender as performance. Gender “is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasure produced by those very prohibitions” (Butler, *Imitation* 24).³ But as Butler argues, “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (Butler, *Imitation* 21).⁴ The performance of gender must therefore be

² Emphasis in the original

³ Emphasis in the original

⁴ Emphasis in the original

continually redeployed, reemphasizing the idealized constructs of woman and man, exposing them as having no natural basis. Butler establishes the performativity of heterosexualized gender.

Consequently, Butler also explains that there is no pre-performative [authentic, or natural] self, but that the self develops through performance: “the ‘being’ of the subject is no more self-identical than the ‘being’ of any gender; in fact, coherent gender, achieved through an apparent repetition of the same, produces as its *effect* the illusion of a prior and volitional subject” (Butler, *Imitation* 24).⁵ Butler acknowledges that this is a difficult idea for most people to accept, and she ascribes this difficulty to “a predisposition to think of sexuality and gender as ‘expressing’ in some indirect way a psychic reality that precedes it” (Butler, *Imitation* 24).

However, I do not think this is a difficult idea to grasp from a Buddhist perspective. In using Buddhist philosophy to understand, expand, and make intelligible Butler’s claim regarding the absence of a pre-performative self, I envision “a comparative project of ‘transculturating’ theory” (Jackson, *Tapestry* 374). By explaining Butler’s theories using Buddhist cosmology, I am flipping the current dichotomy. The existing dichotomy posits the use of western theory to explain non-western knowledges, claiming this is the only way to make those non-western knowledges intelligible. This imperialistic dichotomy operates under the pretense that non-western knowledges cannot speak for themselves, but need the civilizing, modernizing, refined approach of western theory to make any sense in any real way. To counteract these imperialistic myths, I am reversing this dichotomy, claiming that Butler’s theories are enhanced and deepened by applying Buddhist cosmological understanding.

According to Buddhist belief, The Three Characteristics of Existence describe the truth about all life: *anicca* (impermanence - อนิจจัง), *dukkha* (frustration/suffering - ทุกข์), and *anatta* (no-self - อนัตตา).⁶

What humans think of as *self* is actually the five aggregates or *khandha* (ขันธ): material form or the

⁵ Emphasis in the original

⁶ I try to consistently use Pali spellings of Buddhist concepts verses the more readily recognizable Sanskrit spellings due to the Thai Theravada Buddhist context I am working from.

body (*rup* - รูป), sensation or feeling (*wethana* - เวทนา), perception (*sanya* - สัญญา), awareness (*winyan* - วิญญาณ), and volition or will (*sangkhan* - สังขาร). These *khandha* (ขันธ) are in constant flux, always changing in a state of impermanence or *anicca* (อนิจจัง). Gender can therefore also be understood to be impermanent, not a fixed state of being, as gender is variously socially embedded in each of these *khandha* (ขันธ). Thailand is predominantly a Theravada Buddhist country, and while not every individual has a nuanced understanding of Buddhist teachings, it nonetheless acts as a cultural underpinning in much the same way that Christianity does in western countries, even for those individuals who might not be able to, say, explain the concept of the Holy Trinity. Given this background, I feel Butler's performativity theory is applicable (albeit contextually altered and translated) to the Thai context. Butler's lack of a pre-performative self, moreover, can be understood in a Thai context because within Buddhism there is no self at all (*anatta* - อนัตตา). For Butler, the illusionary notion of a concrete, stable, real psychic self is produced through performance: "the performance constitutes the appearance of a 'subject' as its effect" (Butler, *Imitation* 24). I take this production to be enacted within the realm of the *khandha* (ขันธ). In other words, the assumption of a concrete, discreet self/gender (biological or social) is produced as an effect of the performance of the *khandha* (ขันธ), or the different aspects of human existence. These aspects of human existence are identified and described analytically as five separate but interconnected realms of human form. I also believe each of these realms is socially constructed, and through the analytical description of the human form as the five *khandha* (ขันธ), the reality of the self (body/sensation/perception/awareness/volition) is created (see also Armstrong 25). The changefulness of the *khandha* (ขันธ)—their impermanence (*anicca* - อนัตตา)—highlights the constructedness of social and biological gender concepts and the fluidity with which these expressions can be performed. A

closer look at each of the *khandha* (ขันธ์) and the ways gender is socially embedded in them sheds light on my assertion that Butler and Buddha can play nice.

Applicability to Global Gender Theory

To be truly useful in a global sense, any theory regarding gender must be flexible enough so as to be tailored to specific cultural contexts. Other theorists must also be able to critically engage with these theories to sound out their viability and worth.

Gender Theory as Meditative Practice

Within my paradigm, I hope a more complex, triadic understanding of gender can occur cross-culturally. I do not necessarily view gender as an oppressive categorization in and of itself. Humans naturally like sorting things into piles. It is only when that sorting takes on a hierarchical and limiting character that oppression is evident. Why is an understanding of gender as an intricate categorization system important? Because as various gender performances are made explicit, gender as a potentially oppressive system is disrupted and limiting hegemonic discourses are resisted. Theorizing on gender becomes a meditative practice; going beyond the surface components and seeing more clearly the impermanence (*anicca* - อนิจจัง) of these mundane elements of the cycle of rebirth (*samsara* – สังสาร). Our journey to a deeper understanding, a journey to enlightenment, is hopefully furthered by this project.

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For more information about my thesis or for a copy of my manuscript, please email me at tatsantos@cranberryjade.com. Thank you.