



Identity and Subjectivity Construction Among Thai Queer Schoolgirls and  
Lesbian Women

การสร้างอัตลักษณ์และตัวตนของนักเรียนหญิงเกย์และผู้หญิงเลสเบียน

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## Abstract

This article investigates the ways that Thai queer schoolgirls and lesbian women negotiate heteronormative frames and relocate the power of discourse. Although scholars have viewed Thai lesbian women as lacking agency, I demonstrate how they perform female masculinity and enact sex positivity in spaces such as the school, the factory, and the prison. These institutions are meant to shape the subjects' identities and idiosyncrasies into conformity, however I demonstrate how the queer schoolgirls and lesbian women maneuver or subvert such impositions. Although queerness was never meant to survive in such heteronormative regimes, the queer schoolgirls and lesbian women deploy it as a survival tactic, in other words, as a means of preserving the self. Indeed, they are constituted by this queer excess. Such performances of survival undo the falsehood of heteronormativity as origin and of gender as binary, and also allow queer and lesbian-identified individuals to reimagine a free and egalitarian way of being.

**Keywords:** kunlasatree; tom; dee; queer; heterosexual; heteronormative



## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาวิธีการที่นักเรียนหญิงเคเวียร์และหญิงรักหญิงต่อรองกับกรอบบรรทัดฐานแบบรักต่างเพศและเปลี่ยนตำแหน่งแห่งที่อำนาจของวาทกรรมใหม่ แม้ว่านักวิชาการหลายคนตีความว่าผู้หญิงเลสเบี้ยนขาดความเป็นผู้กระทำการ งานนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าพวกเธอแสดงความเป็นชายและแสดงความเป็นเพศในด้านบวกอย่างไรในพื้นที่ต่างๆ อย่างเช่น ในโรงเรียน ในโรงงาน และในคุก สถาบันเหล่านี้ลดทอนอัตลักษณ์และลักษณะเฉพาะของบุคคลให้เป็นไปในแนวเดียวกัน งานนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าหญิงรักหญิงและนักเรียนหญิงเคเวียร์ใช้ยุทธวิธีหลบหลีกหรือพลิกกลับการกดบังคับเช่นนั้นอย่างไร แม้ว่าความเป็นเคเวียร์ไม่น่าสามารถที่จะหลุดพ้นจากกรอบของระบบรักต่างเพศ หญิงรักหญิงและนักเรียนหญิงเคเวียร์ใช้เป็นกลยุทธ์ในการเอาตัวรอด หรืออีกนัยหนึ่งใช้เป็นเครื่องมือในการดำรงรักษาตัวตน ที่จริงแล้วพวกเธอถูกสร้างขึ้นจากความเป็นเคเวียร์ การแสดงถึงการดิ้นรนเอาตัวรอดเช่นนั้นจึงหลุดพ้นจากมายาคติเกี่ยวกับบรรทัดฐานแบบรักต่างเพศที่ถือเป็นต้นกำเนิดและเพศภาวะแบบคู่ตรงข้าม และเปิดให้ปัจเจกบุคคลที่ถูกนิยามว่าเป็นเคเวียร์หรือเลสเบี้ยนจินตนาการใหม่เกี่ยวกับการดำรงชีวิตอย่างอิสระและเท่าเทียมกัน

**คำสำคัญ:** กุสสตรี, ทอม, ดี, เคเวียร์, รักต่างเพศ, บรรทัดฐานแบบรักต่างเพศ



## Introduction

Fifteen years ago, American scholar Megan Sinnott produced an in-depth study of lesbians in Thailand and the ways that they lived and loved. Because it is usually Thai gay men, transgender women, and drag queens that capture the interest of the Western world, Sinnott's contributions were revelatory. Finally, someone noted that women who love women exist in Thailand, and that they performed gender in ways that were not unlike queer women in the United States. Toms (masculine-presenting lesbian women) and dees (feminine-presenting lesbian women) are, in many ways, the Thai equivalent of America's "butch" and "femme." However, Sinnott observed that Thai lesbians seemed to lack an outlet to express an active sexuality, and seemed, to the larger society (as formed through the male gaze) to be asexual.

It was not necessarily that Thai lesbians did not have sex, but that they did not admit to doing so. Some Thai women who had sex with other women would speak of sex in euphemisms, or not talk about it at all, not even amongst themselves. In many cases, mention of *jouissance* was disavowed and replaced with a language of platonic intimacy and care. As scholars before her have done, Sinnott attributed this disavowal to the societal anxiety over active female sexuality in Thailand; Thai women are raised to appear virginal and pure; sex outside of marriage would stain the image of the woman as the "white folded cloth" that she was born to be. This image was created by the *kunlasatree* doctrine, which refers to the concept of proper womanhood and femininity in Thailand. According to *kunlasatree*, good Thai women must be "proficient and sophisticated in household duties; graceful, pleasant, yet unassuming in [their] appearance and social manners; and conservative in [their] sexuality" (Sittitrai & Brown, 1994).

Because Thai women did not, or could not admit to having sexual desire, some queer women would refuse to identify as "lesbian;" to them, the term sounded dirty and pornographic, and sexualized women for the male gaze. In Thai society, it was much more appropriate to acknowledge that male and female genders exist, and that toms and dees were natural extensions of the masculine/feminine order. The gender binary was unquestioned, and sexual agency belonged to the world of (cisgender) men.

This leaves Thai women who love women in a predicament: are they merely passive receptors of the cis-hetero-patriarchy? In *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand* (2004), Sinnott proposes that toms and dees lack sexual

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agency because they fall in line with hegemonic gender norms that “deter female (heterosexual) promiscuity,” and because their relationships and identities do not “disrupt Thai mainstream discourses of proper female behavior” (Sinnott, 2004: 111). She further explains that Thai lesbians have been “rendered asexual within normative meaning structures . . . [and seen as] non-sexual or asexual as only men have the ability to render an encounter as legibly sexual” (Sinnott, 2004: 111). In other words, Thai queer women appeared to reproduce heteronormative norms without much agency.

The aim of this article is to investigate how Thai queer schoolgirls and lesbian women construct their subjectivity and identity in order to negotiate with dominant discourse. I use the term “queer” to denote subjects that are not explicitly involved in same-sex relationships, but perform gender in non-normative ways, such as the non-conformist schoolgirls. Other self-identifying women are referred to as lesbians. On top of analyses of sexual agency, I offer a reading of gender non-conformity as one example of queerness. I propose that queerness, as culture and as identity, inadvertently becomes a tool of survival in spaces where heteronormative structures attempt to homogenize and punish dissenting subjects. I conduct an analysis of female masculinities, from childhood to adulthood, along with a Butlerian investigation of the idea of the “origin” in heterosexualized genders. This essay attempts to reinterpret past sociological research of toms and dees and offer a more nuanced understanding of how Thai queer schoolgirls and lesbian women perform their gender and sexual identities within their situational limitations.

### Childhood Female Masculinity

Marx refers to cultural hegemony as the way in which the ruling class establishes its views in the cultural sphere and makes such beliefs, perceptions, and values the cultural norm. These views are transmitted through what Louis Althusser terms the ideological state apparatus (ISA); these are institutions such as religion, the family, and educational systems. As such, schools play a key role in producing ideal citizens. Thai scholar Kangwan Fongkaew observes this process in a school in Northern Thailand. In his essay, “Beware of the Giant Monster and Its Minions: How Schoolgirls Negotiate Sexual Subjectivities in a Conservative School Climate in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand” (2014), Kangwan employs a Foucauldian lens to analyze the ways in which the school shapes the attitudes and behaviors of its students. Through a Panopticon-like system, systematic arrangements of surveillance work to produce hypervigilance amongst the students. Specifically, the students are “manipulated,



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shaped, and trained; they become docile so that they could be subjected, transformed and improved for the ultimate formation of the hegemonic stereotype of kunlasatree” (Kangwan Fongkaew, 2014: 122) (*italics mine*).

Some students become fully submerged by the school’s values, and reproduce it by reinforcing those rules amongst their peers. However, some “queer” –as in non-normative— students create their own tactics of evasion through cultural and sexual practices. Schoolgirls that enact female masculinity codify a unique form of social rebellion, and perhaps, a sign of sexual alterity.

It is worth noting that the female students’ sexual identities are never specified in this study; many young girls in Thailand transition in and out of same-sex relationships upon entering and leaving all-female schools. Moreover, because pronouns are gender-neutral in the Thai language, the female students’ gender identities are ambiguous. However, Kangwan notes that masculine-presenting female students, or otherwise read as “toms,” are visible within the school. Ara Wilson (2004) describes toms as identifiable by their appearance, mannerisms, and relationships with dees. Toms disregard female gender norms through the adoption of a masculine appearance. Notably, these students perform their gender through chest-binding, wearing school sports uniforms (with sports pants), and cutting their hair short.

Lesbian identities are often seen as temporary, but what can be said of these masculine-presenting students? In the American sense, there is a difference between toms and tomboys. Tomboys may or may not be lesbians, but enact a youthful disregard for the rules while inhabiting “an extended childhood period of female masculinity” (Halberstram, 2019: 5). Meanwhile, butch women are in fact lesbians who are masculine-presenting. Tomboyism is thus quite common among girls, as they signify a desire for the “greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys” (Halberstram, 2019: 6). These actions do not typically cause parental fears, as they are seen as a temporary stage of adolescence. Indeed, the tomboys in Kangwan’s study rebel to a certain extent, while still operating by school rules. We see that the toms in this study perform masculinity in a safe, confined way. They negotiate the rules by doing just enough to fit into what is mandated of them. For example, to evade discipline from school authorities, these masculine-presenting students wear wigs over their short hair, and justify their choice to wear pants instead of skirts by pointing out that sports pants are also a part of the school uniform. To get a better understanding of the schoolgirls’ gender and sexual identity, more should be known of their subjectivity, or the extent to which the tomboys identified with or felt alienated by these prescriptions of conventional femininity.

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Indeed, many of these tomboys may be accused of not being “real” toms (butch); however, understood as tomboys, they perform a social rebellion acceptable of young girls. I argue that this is how the young person maintains their selfhood, before the full force of gender conformity descends upon them. As such, Halberstram (2019) notes that many girls do not leave adolescence as masculine women; to emerge as masculine women means that the girls would have to exist outside of the narrative of womanhood, undoubtedly drawing social stigma and causing a crisis in their life options.

Indeed, masculine presentation may also signify sexual alterity, or lesbianism. The schoolgirls who pursue female same-sex relationships do not outright identify as lesbian, but try out gender and sexual relations among one another, as all-female schools promote a diversity of sexual and gender positions and liaisons. Many queer schoolgirls (read: tomboys) and lesbian women in Thailand do not engage in public display of affection beyond holding hands and hugging, which seem, once again, to be acceptable forms of female affection and is not evidently rebellious to the viewer; such actions seem platonic, and thus there is no way of telling that the relationship is platonic or romantic/sexual. Sinnott (2004) thus explains that lesbian women in Thailand are presumed asexual because there are no avenues for them to be explicitly licentious in public.

Another way to read this complicity is that lesbian Thai women, and in this case, queer schoolgirls, subvert heteronormative meaning structures in order to relocate the power of discourse. The toms and other queer schoolgirls are able to avoid punishment for their non-normative sexualities by appearing virginal before their parents and teachers. The choice to selectively interpret the rules means that the queer schoolgirls and lesbian women can choose to lead their lives with agency, even if they lack the privilege of performing that agency in a visible way. Because solidifying heterosexual assumptions about lesbian women benefits queer schoolgirls and lesbian women, there is little imperative among Thai women, I suggest, to demand a societal rethinking or re-reading of female-female sexuality.

### Adult Female Masculinity

Ratchaneechon Chailangka’s “Lesbian Identity Construction: Different Lifestyles of Female Workers in Northern Region Industrial Estate in Lamphun Province” (1983) can be read as an account of what happens when tomboys grow up to identify as lesbian and gender non-conforming women. While tomboy consciousness is arguably marked by a social rebellion characteristic of prepubescent girls, the passage onto adult female masculinity or other



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stigmatized forms of extreme male identification can perhaps birth consciousness of the stigma of “being gay” (Lewin, 1993: 976). To Ellen Lewin, homosexuality is not merely a “specific sort of sexual behavior, but varied and highly subjective sets of meanings and identifications” (Lewin, 1993: 976). Is there a gay subjectivity? I want to argue that Thai lesbian factory women reject heteronormative conventions through the performance of sexual alterity and female masculinity. The free and pluralistic subculture that the lesbian factory women develop within a Thai Northern factory can be understood as a “healthful alternative” to, or breakaway from, conventional heteronormativity (Halberstram, 2019: 9).

In the Industrial Estate in Lamphun, closed quarters allow, or perhaps even encourage, Thai lesbian women to meet each other and develop romantic and sexual relationships with other lesbian women--to go against the grain of heteronormativity. The women date freely, and have varying sexual practices, including demonstrating ownership of their partners as well as sexual competence through the giving of hickeys (Ratchaneechon Chailangka, 1983: 136-137). They construct their own forms of kinship and networks, and through these friendships, meet partners at bars, restaurants, or lounges. While in Thai society such night scenes are coded as male spaces because they are associated with drinking, drugs, and sex, these lesbians disregard conventional feminine expectations. Rather than identify with *kunlasatree*, they are formed by sex positivity and feminism.

Through active identification with lesbianism and sex positivity, these Thai lesbian women relocate the power of discourse by reinterpreting what it means to be sexually free, lesbian women. They acknowledge that sex between women is in fact sex, and that loss of virginity does not relegate one to abjection. Nor is sex with women associated with secrecy; in fact, sex with women is preferential to sex with men because lesbian sex circumvents the risk of pregnancy. The women demonstrate sexual agency because they are not afraid to have sex for pleasure’s sake (rather than procreation) and to do so publicly, for example in bar bathroom stalls. Whether due to economic circumstances or otherwise, their daringness to have sex in public spaces completely undermines conventions that women should be reserved and naive about sex. This one-night-stand culture challenges Sinnott’s claim that *toms* and *dees* are sexually passive. It also shows that *kunlasatree* is not the only discourse governing the lives of Thai women. In such a scene, casual dating and non-monogamy are ubiquitous.

Heterosexual marriage is often seen as the marker of loyalty and resilience, while queer kinship is seen as weak and impermanent. However, Thai lesbian women in the Industrial

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Estate resignify those terms and imagine a queer family that is not simply the performative, and does not simply mimic heterosexual life milestones; rather it is the symbolic expansion of the meanings associated with queer kinship to one of durability, permanence, and resilience. On the opposite end of promiscuous gay culture, some lesbian female factory workers date for years in monogamous relationships, after which they build families and have children. While traditional marriages assign roles to men and women, lesbian Thai working women share household responsibilities and introduce an element of choice into what is otherwise perceived as duty.

We can read the ways that Thai lesbians enact everyday practices to negotiate with dominant discourse through a reading of this queer monogamy. The commitment to sexual fidelity is not the result of obligation from a signed contract, but out of the desire to be with their partner. In their daily lives, they care for one another, and operate on a basis of fairness and flexibility. They redefine how the household should be set up, breaking down rigid gender roles and notions of domesticity imposed onto women. Some women hold marriage ceremonies before they decide to live together, explaining that they did not want to break with custom or “phid phi.” Some also pay respect to their elders. While their marriages are not legally sanctioned, they are symbolic rituals that show a passing down of certain norms and values. The women strive to present their relationships as real and lasting, and thus redefine popular understandings which deem that lesbian relationships are temporary.

However, some toms still cheat on dees and justify this as an expression of their masculinity. In such cases, toms enact practices that are inconsistent with feminist ideals, and that are more in line with toxic masculinity. These failures to realize a distinctly queer monogamy shows that female-bodied individuals can still be accorded male privilege, and that lesbian identities still repeat heteronormative structures, albeit with a difference. Dees who object to their toms’ infidelity, however, rupture the assumed role of passivity assigned to them, and reveal that there is no one way to be a feminine woman.

Nevertheless, lesbian identity and practices are not consistent among women in all spaces. For example, Suchada Thaweessit documents Thai lesbian women’s subjectivity while working in a factory in Muang Mai. According to her essay, “The Fluidity of Thai Women’s Gendered and Sexual Subjectivities” (2004), lesbian women explain that their attraction towards other women was born as a result of negative experiences with men and with their family. The consciousness of the stigma of “being gay” thus translates not to a desire for queer community and freedom, but produces feelings of shame and abjection.

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Dominant discourses presume that heterosexuality is natural, and that queerness is the result of failure. Suchada Thaweessit describes how two female factory workers, Taem and Mon, grew up knowing that their families preferred boys to girls, and gave boys preferential treatment. Taem explains that this caused her to want to act like a boy. As a reminder, we mentioned earlier how tomboyism may be the adolescent girl's natural desire to enjoy the freedom and independence that boys possess. However, Taem reasons that the cause for her gender non-conformity was the desire to be seen as worthy of affection like her male cousins. In her view, her identity was the result of pathology. Likewise, Mon explains that her parents' wish for a son "deeply affected her mind" and "led her to act like a boy when she was nine years old" (Suchada Thaweessit, 2000: 241). Mon also rationalizes that her tom identity was the result of karma, the Buddhist principle of cause and effect. According to heteronormative views, tom identity is seen as inferior to a heteronormative female identity. As such, Mon reasons that it was her bad actions in the past that led her to her identity as tom.

Notably, these beliefs mirror the obsession of earlier decades surrounding the etiological question of what "causes" homosexuality. That is, homosexuality was never meant to survive; it was something pathological to be eradicated. Heterosexuality is perceived as the norm, and therefore never called into question in such a fashion. According to Judith Butler, "heterosexual privilege operates in many ways, and two ways in which it operates include naturalizing itself and rendering itself as the original and the norm" (Butler, 1996: 126). Taem and Mon's beliefs are damaging not because they view homosexuality as inborn or as a predisposition that was developed earlier in their life, but because they assume that homosexuality and gender-nonconformity need justification, rather than view it as another possible identity that exists in the world. Some lesbian-feminists have avoided the conversation of whether or not queerness is born out of pathology by framing lesbianism as a political choice--a decision to share the best of oneself with other women and to refuse patriarchal relations.

Moreover, in Thai culture, most dees, or feminine-presenting women, are represented as shy, passive, and sexually naive. Fai, a lesbian female factory worker explains, "I can tell you everything about my relationship with [my tom], but I'm too shy to tell you about what I did and felt when I was in bed with her" (Suchada Thaweessit, 2000: 239). Indeed, this is the account of one person, but may nevertheless reveal that dees are not outwardly expressive about their sex lives. However, we see how within the Industrial Estate, women have sexually explicit encounters and are not afraid to shy away from such discussions. As such, there is

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contradictory evidence as to whether or not dees claim to exercise pleasure or to orchestrate sexual exchanges with toms. In another case, Usa expresses, “I live with Nu because I love her and she loves me, but not because she can satisfy me sexually. Sex between women is nothing” (Suchada Thaweessit, 2000: 238). This is followed by Suchada’s explanation that for many lesbian women, intimacy is “based primarily on passionate love rather than sexual desires” (Suchada Thaweessit, 2000: 239). While such statements can be read as the dees’ complete disavowal of sexual pleasure, I argue that the lesbian women place greater importance on care, not as a rejection of sex in its totality, but as a rejection of the heteronormative male paradigm that instills sex and aggression as a rightful passage of men. The dees’ statements may be, perhaps, another articulation of an idealized queer monogamy. Even more, gender and sexual subjectivity is not homogenous, but varied depending on the intersections of the subject’s identity. The assumption that all feminine women are sexually naive is harmful because it attempts to instill a natural state to the feminine. The visibility of the tom as boastful about their sexual exploits is not due to some intrinsic characteristic about masculine-presenting individuals, rather it is due to their privilege as masculine-presenting individuals and the social tolerance, acceptance, and even proliferation of heteronormative and toxic masculinity.

### Performative Genders

On the other hand, within the world of the female prisons, female masculinity offers one social currency and belonging. Saipin Suputtamongkol’s “Incarceration and the Incarcerated: Power and Resistance” (2000) gives an account of the lives of incarcerated Thai queer women. Given that female masculinity is socially advantageous, does it imply that women can simply don tomness?

In the prison, masculine-presenting women who have feminine-presenting partners are referred to as toms or mans. Toms are masculine-presenting women who have previously been in a same-sex relationship outside of prison, while mans are those who were married and had families outside of the prison. The mans/toms and their respective partners form houses in the prison, comprised of moms, dads, and children. Because these feminine-presenting and masculine-presenting women are paired in a binary fashion, and take on mom and dad roles, it may appear that they are merely copies of, or imitations of heterosexualized genders and roles. However, Judith Butler explains that masculinity does not belong to the “male” and femininity does not belong to “female,” despite heterosexuality’s attempt to

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install gender as the property of sex (Butler, 1996: 312). What we have, as heterosexuality compulsively attempts to produce the idea of itself as origin, is phantasms of “man” and “woman.” By that fiction, anything masculine would be a copy of men. However, Butler emphasizes that gender is itself an imitation, and that there is no such thing as an original gender (Butler, 1996: 313). That is to say, heterosexualized gender intimates itself, producing the notion of an original “as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself” (Butler, 1996: 313).

Butler reasons that the notion of an origin is itself suspect, as the claim to origin relies on the production of derivatives that copied them. By that logic, the origin presupposes the copy, meaning that homosexuality would have to have come before heterosexuality. As such, Butler argues that the entire idea of toms and dees copying binary male-female pairings is entirely unstable (Butler, 1996: 313). Recall in Sinnott’s account that toms and dees are seen as binary extensions of the natural male/female order. However, Butler goes on to say that lesbian identities are not necessarily derived from heterosexuality, but are rather implicated in them, and thus expose the “fundamental dependency of the origin” (Butler, 1996: 314). It would appear then that lesbian identities are copies of a copy, without an original. Lesbian identity does not work to copy or emulate heterosexuality, but to “expose” it as an “incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealizations” (Butler, 1996: 314).

The masculine-presenting incarcerated women prove that heterosexualized genders are always at risk at becoming undone. Upon entering the prisons, the mans and toms are coded as having faces that are “rough”, or relatively more than their feminine-identified counterparts. Many of these toms have been in and out of these prisons, and already known what its social dynamics entail. For example, they prepare for prison life by cutting their hair short before they enter. Masculinity is thus employed as a survival strategy, and thus we raise the question of whether or not gender is merely a costume that can be put on and taken off. Mans and toms adopt stereotypical masculine roles, such as assuming the role as caretaker of feminine-presenting women in the relationship.

*“Mans and toms] change for survival’s sake. They cut their hair. These mans will be skinny, and have rough faces. Basically they are women who are not pretty at all. When they stay [in prison], they go into hiding to cut their hair. The shop will not cut it very short, but they will sneak out and cut their hair*



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*themselves. And then they will hide from the authorities for about 2-3 weeks and wait for the haircut to settle in.*” (Saipin Suputtamongkol, 2000: 212)

Heterosexual norms, such the association of men with short hair and masculine characteristics, reappear in the tom who wears short hair and takes on leadership roles. This repetition shows not only that lesbian identities are structured by dominant heterosexual frames, but also that lesbian identities are commentaries on those naturalized positions. Toms and dees parody the idea of heterosexuality as real. This presence signifies that there is a “gay and lesbian repetition of straightness” and shows that in fact heterosexuality constitutes itself through a “convincing act of repetition” (Butler, 1996: 314).

The donning of gender can be read as drag, but Butler claims that drag is not necessarily a “role that can be taken on and put off at will;” this may appear to be contradictory however, given that mans shave their heads and seem to “put on” a uniform before entering the prison. In other words, it appears that within man and tom identity there is a volitional subject that decides on the gender it wishes to be so that it can survive in the prison.

To think further through this contradiction, Butler explains that we may think of sexuality and gender as “expressing in some indirect or direct way a psychic reality that precedes it” (Butler, 1996: 315). In other words, there are aspects of the self, that is the psyche, that is outside the realm of the subject’s consciousness. This “psychic excess” thus denies the notion of a subject that can will itself into being. Furthermore, consider that mans and toms are predetermined to be such through the way they are read; the so-called “roughness” that they exhibit marks them as protectors and leaders in the prison. Queerness is not a costume, but an excess that destabilizes the claims to concreteness assumed by the idea of binary genders.

To Butler, “sexuality always exceeds any given performance, presentation, or narrative;” “there is no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy, and sexuality” (Butler, 1996: 315). Indeed, the assumption that mans and toms must possess certain “male” characteristics, such as aggression and street smarts--“mans are smart, they know who has status” (Saipin Suputtamongkol, 2000: 212)--is inaccurate. As Butler explains, within the “heterosexualized economy” (Butler, 1996: 315), there is always a rupture, provided by this psychic excess, which reveals that there is more than one way to be man/tom and more than one way to be dee.



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Mans and toms can express themselves as “capable, forceful, and all providing” (Butler, 1996: 315), and seem to replicate the husband-like role, but in doing so, may find themselves caught in a “logic of inversion” where providingness becomes self-sacrifice, implicating them in the “most ancient trap of feminine self-abnegation” (Butler, 1996: 315). The care that the mans/toms had sought out in their dee lover might turn instead into a “situation of radical need” (Butler, 1996: 315). Saipin explains that many dees in prison offer mans and toms financial support, and seek reciprocation from them in the form of physical protection. As such the dees have the power to orchestrate the dependency which inverts them into the position of the masculine (Saipin Suputtamongkol, 2000: 212). That is to say, repetitions of heterosexuality are destined to fail, as they are reproduced through phantasms.

Heterosexualized genders are not only at risk for being undone as phantasm, but in the world of the prison, heterosexual relationships are at risk of rupture or divorce. Saipin explains that toms and mans are threats to men, as many married women in the prison will divorce their husbands in order to be with their partners in the prison. According to the incarcerated lesbian women.

*“Women are better at understanding each other [than men]. You can say everything with a woman because they are women like you. There are some who are sincere towards each other and live as a family. Some are sentenced to life in prison together”* (Saipin Suputtamongkol, 2000: 212).

The statement that prison life recreates a fantasy of the outside world thus seems to be called into question. I argue then that it is not that women reenact fantastical heterosexual imitations in the prison, but that the prison provides a vacuum for lesbian identities to exist without intrusion, and as a result reveals the performativity and instability of heterosexualized genders.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I introduced the notion of the “tomboy” to Kangwan Fongkaew’s discussion of the tom schoolgirl, suggesting that what can otherwise be read as gender fluidity or as a fleeting tom identity can be understood as tomboyism, a youthful form of social rebellion characteristic of young girls. I proposed that we think about these youth with non-normative sexualities and genders as “queer,” as the term describes the expression of gender and sexual diversity and creativity beyond heteronormative culture. These queer students



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negotiate their gender and sexual identity through a strategic interpretation of school rules. Despite the pressure to conform, the queer schoolgirls survive the school's oppressive rules by stylizing their gender in idiosyncratic ways; their gender and sexual alterity cannot be contained within the school rules. Although the rules can implicate the schoolgirls' expression, they cannot determine them.

Meanwhile, I read how Ratchaneechon Chailangka's gender-nonconforming lesbian women in the Industrial Estate Lamphun create "healthful alternatives" to heterosexuality through the pursuit of sexual freedom and queer monogamy. Sexual freedom for Thai lesbian women means being able to have sex without associating it with morality. It means being able to meet other queer women at bars and being able to have sex without fear of stigmatization. Queer monogamy, again understood as a phenomenon of alterity outside of heteronormativity, means pursuing a committed relationship that is egalitarian, and that is permanent and resilient. While the lesbian subculture in the Lamphun Industrial Estate makes such ideals possible, in other spaces women's subjectivities are marked by shame and pathology. In Suchada Thaweessit's study, some women believe that their tom identities are the result of pathology or karma; this belief mirrors the incessant societal quest to determine the etiology of homosexuality. The naturalization of heterosexuality makes it appear as though lesbianism and gender non-conformity is the result of failures of the subject. Dees are often read as shy about matters related to sex and queer women are often viewed as dismissive of sex in favor of care. However, I read this seeming disavowal not as a rejection of sex as such, but as a rejection of heteronormative male culture that prioritizes sex and aggression as determinants of intimacy.

The incarcerated lesbian women in Saipin Suputtamongkol's study perform female masculinity in order to survive. However, I argue, via Butler, that this performance does not imply that mans or toms mimic men, as masculinity is not a property of the male. In fact, man or tom enactment of female masculinity parodies heteronormative masculinity, and reveals that there was never an original masculinity to begin with. Indeed, masculinity is not simply donned and removed, as what Butler terms as the "psychic excess," or the unconscious, negates the possibility of a volitional subject. Queerness always emerges as that excess. Indeed, heteronormative roles, because they are mere fantastical repetitions, are fated to fail; the more that mans or toms express themselves as "capable" and "all providing," the more they may find themselves abnegating their pleasure in an ironic logic of inversion.



This essay focuses on the ways that Thai queer and lesbian women, young and older, negotiate heteronormative frames through the construction of their gender and sexual identities. While scholars have read all-female spaces as places wherein fantastical relations mimic heteronormative gender roles, I argue that the dramatization of relations in Thai queer schoolgirls and Thai lesbian women's identity and subjectivity formation reveal the performativity of gender as such. Although queerness was never meant to survive under institutions that are made to reduce, shape, and refine subjects to streamlined conformism--in other words, everyone becomes a number--the schoolgirls, factory workers, and prisoners do queerness as a means of maintaining the self, whether it be in terms of gender expression, sexual vitality or in the literal sense of physical survival; the tactics they employ include quiet negotiation, power plays, and, although not limited to, creating anew. In subcultures where lesbianism proliferates freely, Thai lesbian women reimagine relations to one another and the world; among other individuals, settings, and societies, queerness, however muted, seeps through the cracks. Such slippages reveal that gender is not structured by binaries or rigid borders, rather it is defined by amorphous and contestable definitions and identifications.



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