

## **Migrating aesthetics: Thai ladyboys cabaret from a cosmopolitan view of culture**

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### **Abstract**

This study is based on interdisciplinary research on cultural heritage from a comparative perspective (such as inter cultural studies, dance studies and aesthetics). It offers a new perspective on unique, international scenes of ladyboys cabarets in Thailand via innovative critical approaches emerging from cultural and arts studies in dialogue with other areas of the humanities and social sciences, across temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries. By placing the specific creative expressions of Thai ladyboys at the center of a wide range of contemporary and historical intercultural choreographic relationships, the study explores forms of belonging and spaces of difference and dissidence that challenge universalist paradigms.

### **1. Thai Ladyboys Cabaret from a cosmopolitan view of culture**

**T**his part of our study will introduce some fundamental theoretical elements about cosmopolitanism as a research tool as well as the specific context of emerging and functioning of Thai ladyboys cabarets.

Cosmopolitan view of culture does not hold an essentialist view of what culture is. As Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown state: « cultures are not distinct, self-contained wholes; they have long interacted and influenced one another through war, imperialism, trade, and migration » (2019). Thailand is a South Asian country, which evolves very quickly and where cultures are already cosmopolitan, characterized by hybridity and dynamic metamorphosis. In that particular case the idea of migrant minds, - which inevitably leads to that of migrant aesthetics, - means that they are forced or willing to travel and to experience other ways of being. This global migration phenomenon refers to important exposure to other cultures, and therefore to expanded perception of any kind - political, social, cultural... Thai traditional culture itself is blended in many ways with import and export elements of all kinds. These particular social novelties require situated adjustments performed by the local inhabitants. The country preserves its heritage but also advocates for opening its potential. In regard to that Jeremy Waldron critically argues:

« We live in a world formed by technology and trade; by economic, religious, and political imperialism and their offspring; by mass migration and the dispersion of cultural influences. In this context, to immerse oneself in

the traditional practices of, say, an aboriginal culture might be a fascinating anthropological experiment, but it involves an artificial dislocation from what actually is going on in the world. » (Waldron, 1992, 100)

Ladyboys subculture within the social landscape of Thailand is an interesting phenomenon because of its spiritual background as Thai Buddhism peacefully acknowledges the existence of a third sex, as one body may contain two souls. However certain social policy and other religious beliefs about previous reincarnation issues, related to that multiplicity of souls - makes their full integration still challenging. Most ladyboys have low paid jobs, with diminished future perspectives, compared to the current middle class social upheaval in the country.

In regard to that cultural cosmopolitanism may also defy the vision of preserving or protecting a culture by privileging one allegedly pure version of that culture. The risk of belief in purity as resistance actually cripples its ability to adapt to changes in circumstances according to Waldron (1992), quoted above, and other researchers working on the « for » and « against » of contemporary conceptions of cosmopolitanism - Appiah (2006), Benhabib (2006), Scheffler (2001).

These authors reject the premise that the options available to any individual must come from a particular culture. Meaningful options may come from a variety of cultural sources. Therefore many ladyboys work in the field of international entertainment such as tourist industries, ladyboys cabarets and other foreigners related services. This type of jobs allows them to reinforce, complete and enrich their inter cultural upbringing, their social network and most of all - their chance for individual *épanouissement* (to « flourish » in French), by being included in a broader political picture. Thus ladyboys accumulate cultural materials, in order to create their own particular cultural structure. One example of these achievements within their communities is the emergence of multiple ladyboys cabarets. This type of theatrical performance is conceived as a cosmopolitan patchwork, influenced by a variety of cultural sources, discussed further in the paper.

## **2. Intercultural circulations, interactions and aesthetic transfers**

Ladyboys cabarets are places where that cultures are overlapping and interactive, but they nonetheless maintain the fact that individuals mingling within these spaces belong to separate societal cultures. For instance, the financial gap between the inflow of W.E.I.R.D. (a popular abbreviation which stands for 'western educated industrialized rich and democratic') visitors and the local performers remains ever lasting.

On the other hand the ladyboys cabaret ensures many opportunities for genuine cosmopolitan cultural interplay. Kymlicka has argued that while options available to any modern society come from a variety of ethnic and historical sources, these options become meaningful to us only if « they become part of the shared vocabulary of social life—i.e. embodied in the social practices, based on a shared language, that we are exposed to... » (1995). The cabaret becomes a specific place of embodiment, especially when spectatorship is transformed into a series of invitations for a huge variety of social and entertainment interactions: dancing on stage with the performers, tipping, sharing drinks and informal chats.

A critical perspective of its limits emphasizes the short term temporality of these encounters and exchanges: « That we learn...from other cultures, or that we borrow words from other languages, does not mean that we do not still belong to separate societal cultures, or speak different languages » (Kymlicka, 1995, 103). However the embodied experience of all kinds of *otherness* according to Julia Kristeva, can help us to know better « the stranger within me » (*l'étranger/e-qui-est-en-moi*) in a most efficient way (Kristeva, 1991). Embodied spectatorship induces a more cosmopolitan view of cultures, which mix on daily basis in Thai dynamic contemporary society. This possibility of encounter between migrant body minds in specific artistic setting is one of the first conditions which can provide mutual empowerment: « the aim of group-differentiated rights is not to freeze cultures in place but to empower members of minority groups to continue their distinctive cultural practices so long as they wish to » (Kleingeld&Brown, 2019).

### **3. Few analytical key concepts about the choice of fieldwork: gender, religion, politics and globalization**

The fieldwork of this study is devoted to the relationships between dance and *queer*. It addresses more specifically the way in which contemporary choreographic scenes draw on the aesthetic and political potential of non-institutional scenes to implement a *queer* aesthetic. Therefore few analytical key concepts about the choice of fieldwork: gender, religion, politics in relation to globalization... are approached with more precision by the author.

#### **Gender**

In terms of performance, the southern islands of Thailand have a diversity of entertainment activities. The country's long history of diverse ethnic groups and cultures offers moreover natural heritage of sea and world-renowned diving sites:

« Additionally, the night life and entertainment activities are attractive factors to fascinate tourists, of which Ladyboy Cabaret Shows are prominent, featuring various performances of songs, dances, musicals and comedies which reflect a multi-culture from countries around the world such as China, India, Russia as so on. The clever choreography and fabulous costumes make the shows spectacular, colorful and fun. » (Maneenetr & Ha Tran, 2014, 214)

According to a commercial perspective as described above, nowadays there is a potentially growing market of ladyboys shows all over the country as Thailand accepts its transgender citizens. The Thai term *kathoei*, which roughly translates to “lady boys” in English, refers to a wide range of transgender women. It describes varying levels of femininity, such as men who dress and act like women or men who undergo medical procedures to anatomically become female. The term *kathoei* is most commonly used in Thailand, but some transgender citizens find it offensive. Instead, they use terms like *phuying khaam phet*, which translates to “women who have crossed sex or gender.”

### Religion

The acceptance of *kathoei* culture is also linked to Buddhist beliefs which generally promote unity, despite sexual differences. One tendency in various forms of Buddhism is the sense, belief and recognition that humans are all one, despite illusory differences like race, gender and sexual orientation. Peter Jackson, a professor of Thai history at the Australian National University, researches the history of Buddhism, gender and sexuality within Thailand. He conducted a study of Thailand’s same-sex and transgender cultures and he found Thai Buddhism does not ban homosexuality.: « Same-sex and transgender [behaviors] have historically been ignored by Thai religious and legal authorities. Thai Buddhism does not regard same-sex eroticism between laymen or laywomen as a sin » (Jackson, 2003).

### Politics and globalization

In regard to that the word ‘cosmopolitan’, which derives from the Greek word *kosmopolitēs* (‘citizen of the world’), has been used to describe a wide variety of important views in moral and socio-political philosophy:

« The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, are (or can and should be) citizens in a single community. Different versions of cosmopolitanism envision this community in different ways, some focusing on political institutions, others on moral norms or relationships, and still others focusing on shared markets or forms of cultural expression. » (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019).

In cultural cosmopolitanism, the community of world citizens functions as a positive ideal to be cultivated. Ladyboys cabaret can be considered as an artistic version of cosmopolitanism as transgender performers and visitors embody the notion of ‘world citizenship’ literally or

metaphorically. The philosophical interest in cultural cosmopolitanism lies in its challenge of shared cultures on daily basis.

#### **4. Migrant aesthetics as method: new paradigm and case studies**

Objects of study for around ten years now, *queer* aesthetics escape attempts at definition likely to freeze them. However, certain characteristics make it possible to outline its contours: the presence of *queer* in art has the effect of "disturbing the representations of the body, identities, and sexualities<sup>1</sup>" (Pellus, 2020:123). This disorder is manifested by the presence on stage of corporealities which, without denying the material reality of the body, do not fit, among other things, into gender norms, more broadly, into "categories" such as man/woman or feminine/male.

Most of the performers in ladyboys shows are transvestites or transgendered meaning they have undergone extensive surgery to transform themselves from biological males to females. Ladyboys are well known for their surreal beauty, difficult to achieve by women, as many of them are very tall, naturally muscle toned and skinny. However some aspire to have an imperfect female body, and use excessively female hormones to get the habitual problems women have such as weight gain, cellulite, and so on.

##### **Case studies**

The current study of the complexity of this particular migrant aesthetics is mostly based on two case studies - a ladyboys cabaret, organized as a theater, with no direct interaction between the performers and the audience (observed via spectatorship), and ladyboys cabaret which takes place in a night club where interactions are very important via the actions of social and economical value such as tipping, sharing drinks and informal chats before, during and after the performances (observed via immersive fieldwork). These two places would not be named directly, as well as the real names of the performers would not be pointed out.

However the author of the study is fully aware that keeping anonymity in the field of academic dance studies remains difficult, and sometimes impossible. Few years ago an experiment was held in *L'atelier anthropologique de la danse*, a research group of dance anthropologists, based in Paris, France, by conducting a series of presentations of PhD projects, each supposed to hide the real identities of the artists discussed. Within less half an hour all the members of the group have guesses precisely who is who, pointing out few renowned choreographers, as the description of their specific artistic features had made it impossible to conceal the names.

## **Interactivity via participatory observations**

Ladyboys cabarets are well integrated in local tourist industries as their performers take part in, make publicity for, and share information about the local full moon and half moon parties as well as any other entertainment event, scheduled inland or on the neighboring islands. In this context the sheer idea of cultural cosmopolitanism has simultaneously turned into a commercial and a choreographic issue because the shows must address, and preferably appeal to multicultural audiences. The ladyboys from theater cabaret plays songs in English, French, Russian, Chinese, even Korean. Sometimes the transgender dancers of the nightclub cabaret ask directly the visitors where they come from, in order to adjust the program on the spot.

### **5. Ladyboys' corporealities and identities on stage: analysis methodology**

Ladyboys' corporealities often appear within anti-illusionist stagings, characterized by artificiality, theatricality and heterogeneity, where the boundaries between the arts, and sometimes those between art and life, are blurred. As such, dance, understood here in its stage form, "has in common with a queer praxis that it [can] oppose[r] to any essentialist conception of an "original" body, "absolute" or "universal"( Pellus, 2015,127). In *Sex, Gender and Sexuality*, Elsa Dorlin defines *queer* praxis as it developed in the cabarets and nightclubs of Harlem from the 1920s, and shows how, through a "codification" effect, it operated a shift towards an aesthetic, by « functioning on the offbeat, exuberant, parodic staging of dominant norms in matters of sex, sexuality and color » (Dorlin, 2008, 109). This praxis extends to other scenes outside the institutional scenes of choreographic creation or contemporary dance. It inspires and nourishes the aesthetics of many alternative choreographic scenes such as ladyboys' cabarets.

There is no universal definition of what a ladyboy or a *kathoey* is. Some researchers try to organize their individual experiences into various subjective categories such as psychological (gender identification) or biological (gender transformation) criteria. However the author of this study considers that an alternative and efficient way to grasp and to understand the multiplicity of *kathoey* identities is considering and multilayering their individual stories such as *récits de vie* (life stories) methodologies developed in the fields of humanities. This kind of sensible and sensitive approach to human self and matter in-the-making may give a broader and more nuanced account of their subjective experiences. The latter have been theorized by the



French queer philosopher Michel Foucault under the term of *technologies de soi* (self technologies) and *pratiques de subjectivation* (practices of subjectivities in-the-making) (Foucault, 1978-1986).

Foucault defines «technologies of the self » as « reflected and voluntary practices by which men not only fix rules of conduct for themselves but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their particular being, and to make their life an *oeuvre* » (1986). In other words, technologies of the self are what Michel Foucault defines as the methods and techniques through which human beings constitute themselves. According to him, individuals are perpetually engaged in processes whereby they conceive and produce specific ethical self-understandings:

« Technologies of the self... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. » (Foucault, 1986)

Following this definition, technologies of the self can be anything from reading, writing, exercise, and meditation, to Instagram, TikTok... What makes Foucault's framework so useful is that it allows one to look not only at individuals' behaviors and aspirations, but also the tools and practices they use to enact them, as well as the cultural contexts surrounding them. The particular operations a person can perform on themselves, the transformations they can entail, and the states of consciousness they can enable are countless:

« If we contrast the stereotyped "1968" experience — a cosmic consciousness free associating between disparate ideas, the boundaries of the self slipping away — and contrast it with "2018" — a hyper-focus on instrumental knowledge and achieving social and economic mastery through personal productivity — the yawning chasm between various modes of inner experience becomes apparent. In both of these examples, we see the connection between technologies (synthesized drugs and recorded media) and the beliefs their users bring to bear on them. In turn, these individual practices are embedded within a set of cultural beliefs and traditions that create a framing for the experience. » (Mazzola, 2019)

Ladyboys' self technologies manifest also by the persona they choose to be, to perform, to become on stage. Their careful embodiment of codified body language, initially performed by western pop stars, is actually a subtle engineering of inevitably alternative, and therefore often more interesting interpretations, compared to the original versions of a mainstream song or a popular simplified choreography, which is almost a flashmob, or even the dress code of a top list singer. Therefore the author of this study has chosen to focus on few « diva » persona constructions and to analyse how they are composed and performed.

## 6. Results (qualitative data): the Divas

This part of the study is based on immersive fieldwork since 2018, led in Thailand via spectatorship and embodied practice. The ladyboys involved are presented by pseudonyms: 'fake' names in order to avoid phenomenon for tracking and to ensure personal data protection. The data analysis is completed by personal fieldwork notes in order to give full account of the author's subjective experience of the artistic phenomenon, and her selection of data elements.

In academic language « we » usually stands for a research community. In this part of the paper « we » stands mostly for audience perception, as to bring momentarily the reader of the paper on the stage of the ladyboys cabarets via the use of fieldwork notes.

Fieldwork notes as subjective stance of participatory observation:

And just like Pina Bausch's dancers, we (the audience) begin to know them, one by one, to love them in a way, and to wait impatiently for their next solo or team up creation to be staged. Most cabarets change their programs each evening in order to keep attracting visitors and to maintain some loyal fans.

### Working conditions and status

The Ladyboys cabaret is evolving and since the pandemic crises, the PostCovid situation has brought new audiences, open minded and eager to enjoy the transgender performances on the basis of their up-to-date *queer* friendly education. Ladyboys themselves are changing, as Anne Jakrajutatip states from the perspective of successful transgender woman, a founder of JKN GLOBAL GROUP Public Limited, and an owner of Miss Universe, Miss USA, Miss Teen USA and CNBC Thailand and JKN18 TV. She claims that her « sisters » are nowadays exposed to much more education and information about *queer* theoretical work and active political engagements such as fight for equal rights, which reinforces their social well being. Anne also ensures few scholarships for ladyboys educational projects each year, in order to help them rise up by acquiring more knowledge, and social skills for self positioning and standing up for their own choices (Jakrajutatip, JKN, 2023).

The transgender performers are undergoing a transition from *entertainer* to *performer*, or *dancer*. There are also emerging professional *house choreographers* positions, as more experienced artists migrate within the country. Via the cabaret performances the ladyboys are gradually establishing their own style and vocabulary. There is even a star system, on tiny scale, in



each cabaret with regular audience. However the teams are small and often a chorus or a star girl is just the same. Shared solidarity makes that no one's left behind.

As an individual performer each ladyboy constructs her own persona. The gender blender brings even more complexity to this process because of the constant performativity involved. Ladyboys develop particular reflexes and alertness to adapt their transformation. They can offer an interpretation of any eastern or western female celebrity by the use of wit and well placed theatricality.

The latter is closely related with the history of dance which manifests a longue, if not even an ever-lasting tradition, of female performers, building up their own public reputation and persona. Scandals are welcome if they can bring more audience. The author of this study has previously explored this phenomena in a paper dedicated to few soloists of *Trocaadero Ballet Company* (Vassileva, 2012). Its the dual efforts to become a woman as well as to perform a woman, which make these choreographies so exquisite. The performance studies based concept of « life as art, art as life » (Dewey, 1934) finds here one of the most suitable exemples of concrete embodiment via transgender work.

The feminist perspective of this study takes into consideration the first layer of transformation, labelled as « transgender », as well as the second one - which is to say the subjective imaginary which sustains it into life and takes it into action. John Dewy defined the performative quality as lying within this double stance which unites as one (1934). Never did he know how well Thai ladyboys cabarets will embody his ideology/vision.

Fieldwork notes as subjective stance of participatory observation:

Ladybodys remain a minority, always threatened by social, political and cultural exclusion. Therefore their cabarets are close up spaces which allow them to exist, to survive, and if lucky - to flourish. They are very much aware of the basic principles for successful trade, as we may quote alias Little MC performance on the idea of « reciprocity », with the underpinning (for those who know) - « You can't buy this kind of publicity, baby ». These tight and tiny artistic communities protect each other, and stand for each other in a most collaborative way.

### **Choreography Analysis**

Can we define Ladyboys Cabaret peculiar aesthetics as a confrontation between Madonna and Thai traditional dance? One of the opening choreographies at S. represents precisely that

kind of stylistic encounters. The lyrics « Strike a pose » here refers to the voguing shots from the famous video *Vogue* (1990), performed on stage by half of the dancers, while the other half performs specific elaborate postures derived from traditional Thai local repertory.

Two teams confront on stage by progressively blending moves and styles. There is no winner, unless we consider the climax moment of stripping a traditional performer to underwear by Madonna-like dancer as an unexpected « scoop » about how the current cultural cosmopolitan evolution goes, in the particular field of Thai Ladyboys Cabaret aesthetics.

### ***Dear (solo)***

Alias Dear takes up the stage: under the lyrics « bossy cause I am the boss » of the song *Instruction* (2018) by Jax Jones, she dwells on urban styles and pop music. Dear plays the characters of strong women, who know what they want and how to get it. The choice of her solo songs indicates a very willful transgender project which carries all the features required for being and acting as up-to-date feminist. She can multiply agencies through diversity in repertory and through clever use of social media which displays her broad intercultural knowledge - cartoons, movie scenes, dance clips of all styles. Her « persona » is assertive and powerful. These qualities match the gender blender of female and male features of a « working girl » who nowadays has to compete with men and sometimes embody their body language in order to be more persuasive.

### **Ensemble**

Ladyboys are often suspected of mental health problems. The current law in Thailand, which allows a transgender transformation, requires double expertise by professional psychiatrists before any authorisation for surgical intervention. That kind of social pressure draws ladyboys into acute parodies of any normative mental health definition. « I want a doctor, I need a doctor », sings Dear, mentioned above.

The way most ladyboys tackle mental health issues on stage is driven by humor and critical perspective, as they recall past experiences of gender transformation. The funny lyrics they pick up to dance to, are meant to point out all the efforts they have to make in order to convince medical experts of all kinds in their genuine need for biological redesign.

Transgender performers on stage can be perceived by some sceptic audience as a *freak show*. Ladyboys are aware of that danger because they want their current cabaret performances to be

recognized as valuable artistic work. Here comes into play the strategy of reversing values, conceived by the *queer* performers of *La cage aux folles* in Broadway since 1983.

### **Alice (solo)**

« Don't you want your girlfriend to be freak as me? » asks alias Alice in Wonderland, dancing to the lyrics of *Don't Cha (Ralphi's Hot Freak Radio Mix)* by Pussycats (2010). She uses the song to make a precise list of all the advantages held by a transgender woman. There is a certain confusion between « fun » and « but » or « butt »... This fairylike ladyboy is far from spoiled and shows off the precious knowledge she possesses (mostly SM orientated) in a spectacular solo under the lyrics of *You'd better work bitch* by Britney Spears (2013). The ensemble of the cabaret backs up for her. Four more divas align and walk along, offering to the audience additional entertainment.

### **Ensemble**

This ensemble may remind us the famous quartet *Le Grand pas de quatre*, which is still preserved in current western ballet repertory. *Le Grand Pas de Quatre* was choreographed by Jules Perrot in 1845. Each ballerina has an individual variation, which is performed in-between the opening and the finale, danced together. These variations were choreographed for four prima ballerinas, starring in 1845. They were designed to display the best features of each in a competition via showing off their specialties - an elegant *port de bras* or very quick small jumps.

The contemporary version, revised by the ladyboys (described above) presents similar individual virtuosity display but the spirit of co-working is quite different. Most transgender performers can survive only by the support, the solidarity and the help of the « divas ».

### **Rihanna (solo)**

Therefore, the interpretation of alias Rihanna *Shine bright like a diamond* takes more of a meaning of female empowerment. The moments of becoming one with tipping spectators mimic the lyrics of the song. She is also the one who declares the rules of the cabaret in the middle of the show: « You respect our past, we respect you », followed by « you have to tip us », « you have to give us your money ». And adding some financial details about various costs of sexual favours (you never know).

After Rihanna's hips-slay walk, perfectly embodied, there is a new surprising solo which brings on stage the vintage character of a playboy bunny. The audience is mesmerized with the

multilayered performativity of it - to begin with the detailed embodiment of white North American female body type by a Thai ladyboy.

### **Bunny (solo)**

The Playboy Bunny has turned into a cultural archetype. Currently it takes a lot of courage to revive it on stage, especially in a western theater. This kind of male gazed constructed and sexually objectified representation of a woman has been so much criticized by most American feminists, it has completely vanished. The sudden appearance of the forbidden bunny in Thai cabaret gives us the impression of having met an animal threatened by extinction, which has to be tipped in order to ensure its economical survival.

This apparition may recall Pina Bausch's version of the same Playboy bunny archetype in *La plainte de l'impératrice* (1990). She wonders, alone and lost in desert muddy land, trying to dig out some food from the ditches, dressed up with long silk gloves. The Thai ladyboy's interpretation of the bunny is more joyful as it is capable of guessing and fulfilling any corny fantasy. She would even grasp the mobile of some distracted spectators to film quickly, and send across the planet (using their contact lists) compromising live footage, without asking for permission.

The playboy bunny here (in the cabaret) is actually a skillful predator. She is able to snatch anyone (though exclusively choosing male visitors) and bring him on stage to display a dominant posture. This attitude can be linked to the psychological phenomenon of ladyboys preserving few basic male features such as more direct approach to seduction strategies compared to female gender educational conditioning.

### **Ensemble (and audience)**

From an intercultural perspective the symbolics of rabbit in Asia stands for luck and prosperity. It may personify a Moon goddess as it lives on the moon. For instance ancient Chinese believed there was a rabbit living on the moon. They could see it on the shiny full moon on Mid-Autumn Day (the 15th day of the eighth month in the Chinese lunar calendar). Besides the divine image, Chinese culture regards the rabbit as the embodiment of cleverness. There are many idioms to describe its vigilance and agility, for example, *Jiao Tu San Ku*: a canny rabbit always has several holes, making it hard for predators to track it down.

In Thai folklore a rabbit (or hare) is also closely associated with the moon and as such, the animal has become a symbol of the official provincial seal of Chanthaburi. The 'Moon Rabbit'

also appears in the folklore of a number of Asian countries including Korea. Thai stories about it may have originated from the Buddhist Jataka Tales about the previous lives of the Buddha in both human and animal form.

Even though none of these references are evoked in any way (except successful tipping) on stage by the Thai ladyboy performing a bunny, they are an inevitable part of local cultural environment and therefore social conditioning of specific aesthetic perception of this creature. Performing a bunny in Thailand in front of many Chinese and Korean customers does stir new unexpected inter cultural beliefs.

Encounters with ladyboys' cabaret myriad of performative practices can be aligned with any practices by which a subject emerges, endures, gets disrupted in its beliefs and becomes other than itself. This study has outlined how these practices of subjectivation can occur in relation to cultural cosmopolitanism. Encountering ladyboys performing in a cabaret is a dynamic research process involving a transmission or flow between bodies, qualities, relationships, properties and experiences of Thai and other cultures. This flow is also brought into play by the migrant minds of the visitors. That transmission, to borrow terms from Deleuze (1980) can be described in terms of viral contamination or intensive connectedness, such as the following examples.

The sense of humour and subtle irony, the ability to turn any situation upside down helps ladyboys performers to rearrange the world as they wish in order to ensure their economic and symbolic survival. As alias Cola (solo) mixes the lyrics of two songs *I will be popular: In thousand shades of blues* (*Popular* by Eric Saade, 2011, and *In your eyes* by Inna, 2013), she builds her character based on cheerful sparkling energy, always overflowing each step and gesture with joy and big smile. To begin with, she is already one of the most popular ladyboys in the cabaret. On her hand alias Josephine (solo) manifests onstage gender fluctuation mastery, by performing a woman who plays to be a man who plays to be a woman, inspired by early twentieth century Flamenco symbols of gender power equality...

All these performances show how globalization interacts with local culture. The French community of PhD students specializing in dance studies (*L'atelier des doctorant.es en danse, Centre National de la Danse, Paris, France*) claims on the subject of queerness-in-dance: Indeed, dance is also found (first of all?) outside the institution: in clubs, parades and carnivals,

balls, so many popular dance practices whose origins do not date from today and which constitute spaces – like the cabarets of Harlem – conducive to artistic and political expression and the representation of minorities. Since the 1990s, these scenes, which largely belong to the world of the night, have been the subject of recovery by the dominant and scholarly culture, from which *queer* aesthetics is theorized. It therefore seems necessary to question these relationships at work between informal scenes and institutional scenes.

The choreographic and playwright analysis of ladyboys cabarets' performances contribute to the understanding of how the performers elaborate the intensive and affective dimensions of transformation on stage. This study accounts for the ways it may be articulated with transgender experience as a practice of subjectivation. Experienced as a body of new habit and preserved memory, the cosmopolitan transgender body of the performers mediates both the world we inhabit, and the kinds of subjects we may potentially become. This account of the transgender body stands in stark contrast to conventional notions of gender, which tend to conceive of male or female in terms of representational systems. As the spectator can recognize and relate to the Playboy Bunny or Rihanna, such performances treat both gender and theatrical codes as clear signs of social, cultural or political phenomena put into display by the actual lived experience of the transgender body.

Finally, the qualitative methodology of this study - mostly immersive fieldwork, allows the shift from one space to another, in order to experience fully the disturbance created in terms of representations of gender and sexualities, but also in terms of boundaries between "scholarly" and "popular", between spaces "formal" and "informal", and finally between the arts, the cultures and the minorities.

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