

*The Voyage Out:  
Transacting Sex under  
Globalization*

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IF THERE IS A SEA-CHANGE that has marked queer/sexuality studies in the past decades, it has been the turn to globalization, variously understood through rubrics such as the transnational, geopolitical, international, global, and diasporic. Even as the sign of globalization has been fervently (and occasionally shallowly) embraced by many scholars of sexuality, there has been an equal emphasis on understanding this turn to globalization as at once novel and familiar. That is, if globalization is to be broadly understood as a set of economic, social, and political practices that are transnational, then its emergence can hardly be termed “new,” given that such practices have existed for many centuries. On the other hand, there is, as many scholars have argued, something extraordinary and “new” about the extent and rapaciousness of such practices in a post-Fordist era, as nation-states both cede and appropriate ground in the face of new forms of globalization.<sup>1</sup>

For sexuality studies, this heightened focus on geopolitics, I want to suggest, has functioned more as a cautionary tale, as a reminder of its own tainted colonial genealogies, than as a moment of analytical surety. Sexuality studies, in all its disciplinary avatars, continually negotiates what it means to have a renewed conceptual intimacy with sites of alterity, previously mediated through racialized discourses of colonial anthropol-

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ogy, literature, sexology, and law. The challenge has been to transform the very genealogical imaginary of the study of sexuality, to move, in other words, from an uncritically culturally appropriative relationship to spaces of difference, to a language of responsibility and situated knowledges under globalization. Thus, key terms, such as gender, homosexuality, third sex, transgender, queer, must necessarily be read as codifying histories and desires that not only articulate different meanings to different constituencies, but are also invoked to legitimize contradictory modes of understanding. Such self-reflexive evaluations of the field are not paralyzing conceptual liabilities, but more pathways for further analysis into languages that vigilantly reimagine the vastness of sexuality's locations and its analytical frames.<sup>2</sup>

#### BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

*With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India.* By Gayatri Reddy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

*The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City.* By Ara Wilson. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.

*The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia.* By Tom Boelstorff. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.

However, even as sexuality studies makes its critical voyage out, parochialisms of time and space continue to trouble its explorations. A substantial proportion of the scholarship produced under the rubric of sexuality studies and/or queer studies still narrates sexuality through the prism of a short-lived history, often relegating the materialities of colonialism and empire to the nominal status of recurring referents, rather than terrains of thick description.<sup>3</sup> I have titled this review essay "The Voyage Out: Transacting Sex under Globalization" to focus precisely on the multiple ways in which recent scholarship on sexuality navigates through, and sinks uncomfortably in, the very colonial landscapes it hopes to exceed and supplant. The provocation here is to begin with a notion of sexuality that has at its center questions of movement and

uncertainty and to see these as productive forces of emergence. To do so, I turn to three recent texts on the messy entanglements of globalization and sexuality studies: Tom Boelstorff's *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, and Ara Wilson's *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City*. Within these texts, sexuality studies bears witness to the effects of globalization, even as it strains from within and without such formations.

It is also no coincidence that the texts reviewed here (Boelstorff's, Reddy's, and Wilson's) are squarely located within the discipline of anthropology. Once considered the *bête noire* of sexuality studies and a central trafficker in colonial models of culture, anthropology has emerged more recently as a consistent site of innovative queer scholarship. What marks my grouping of these texts together, however, is not so much their evident place in the discipline of anthropology, or even their attachment to the moniker of Asian studies, but rather their willingness to think of sexuality between geopolitical sites, rather than simply within them. Each of the books attends to a different sense of area studies and its place within sexuality studies, even as few of the texts fully agree on how and why languages of the geopolitical matter to the articulation and meaning-making structures of sexuality. If there is some overlap on the importance of a localized geopolitics (and often nation-state bound paradigm—India, Thailand, Indonesia) to sexuality studies, there is less on how individual histories of the local converge and why these histories should even attempt to do so. Indeed, what the works share is an understanding that the uneven production of sexualities is not an effect of a globalizing biopolitics, or merely the disciplinary means by which sexuality is secured and maintained, but rather a space of possible intervention and transformation.

Concerns around comparison, translation, and commensurability undergird the analytical struggles of these three texts and raise, I want to suggest, some general theoretical questions: What unfolds in the shift of analysis from one geopolitical space to another? What are the theoretical terms that have become the *lingua franca* of trans-/cross-cultural sexuality studies? How are allegedly anachronistic and out-of-place languages transacted as we shift and move through multiple meaning systems? To answer

these questions, each of these texts attends to the challenge of developing an analytical vocabulary that exposes the pervasiveness of globalization (or neocolonialism, as the case may be) in multiple sites, without recourse to the rigidity of a contextual determinism.<sup>4</sup> My aim here is not to merely summarize or be critical, but to explore the discursive convergences and limits of these questions in the texts as they bear upon the task of a trans-cultural study of sexuality.

Tom Boelstorff's ambitious *The Gay Archipelago* most directly addresses the theoretical challenges confronting cross-cultural scholarship in sexuality studies. Boelstorff brings a vibrant and impressive array of theoretical approaches to bear upon an ethnography of "sexual positions, not persons per se" in Indonesia that is at once varied and unified, a veritable landscape of what he terms as "archipelagic subjectivities and socialities" (7). More specifically, Boelstorff outlines and complicates four conceptual binaries at the heart of sexuality studies in an age of globalization. The first binary involves the discursive genres that literatures outside the West are seen to occupy: they are either texts of convergence, "assuming that terms like gay or lesbi are spread through international activism," or they are texts of euphoric celebration whereby the "traditions" of non-normative sexuality elsewhere are salvaged and romanticized. The second binary rests on the mystifications of similitude and difference, both of which either render all gay subjects the same everywhere ("the transcendental gay man or lesbian woman, characterized by a supposed essential similitude") or alternately essentially "different," based on their location and biology ("an essential difference masked by terms like gay and lesbi"). The third and fourth binaries revolve around issues of scale and the impact of globalization. Non-normative sexualities outside the "West" emerge as excessively local and/or excessively global, making the forces of globalization equally positive or negative (27).

Although it is impossible to do full justice to the range of Boelstorff's multiple chapters and arguments, it is worthwhile to focus on a concept central to his book's ambitions: "dubbing culture." For Boelstorff, such a concept not only undoes the binaries mentioned above, but also provides one viable model of cross-cultural intervention in sexuality studies. The turn to "dubbing" exposes the myth of authenticity undergirding ethno-

graphic work, underscoring in its place the impossibility and indeed the dangers of what he calls a “faithful” (read true/authentic) cultural translation. Such a focus on “dubbing culture” is necessarily “queer,” as it eschews any claims to originality or normativity and speaks instead to the productivity of differential subjectivities and voices. “Dubbing” becomes a self-reflexive practice of translation that “revels in its inevitable failure (moving lips that will never match the sounds of speech)” and holds out new possibilities for thinking beyond the logic of commensurability. “Dubbing culture,” Boelstorff ultimately contends, functions as a “metaphor for conceptualizing contemporary globalizing processes, ethnographic practice in an already globalized world and the homologies between these projects of interpretation and configuration” (5-6). It is this conceptual framework of culture in/and translation that Boelstorff brings to bear upon his dexterous (and sometimes dizzying) braiding together of Southeast Asian studies, media studies, postcolonial theory, queer studies, and anthropology.

More specifically, *Gay Archipelago*'s multiple chapters focus principally on three sites: Surabaya in East Java, Makassar (formerly Ujung Pandang) in South Sulawesi, and Bali. Even as Boelstorff conducts extensive ethnographic research in these sites, he is careful to point to the hazards and potentialities of extending his observations to the entire archipelago. In other words, Boelstorff variously asks his readers to consider the tricky challenges of writing an account of a historical formation (queer sexualities in Indonesia) without fetishizing that formation and without abstracting it from its situated knowledges. Thus, chapter 2, “Historical Temptations,” addresses the history of “homosexuality” in Indonesia up to the 1980s, without surrendering to the logic of causality and development. The central question here circles around the possibility of a history, without precedent, without sources, without the languages of empiricism and culture that so prominently figure in the writings of histories of sexuality (34-42). To develop such a (missing) relationship to history, Boelstorff offers the genealogical grid of the “archipelago,” a grid that encompasses a range of sources, from oral histories, to everyday life practices, translated through the languages of “ethnolocality,” through spaces of openness that do not deny the nation, but rather imagine new geographies of identification.

The bulk of Boelstorff's book stretches the theoretical task of doing "archipelago" ethnographic work across broad sites such as mass media (television shows), public spaces (discos), and religious practices, to name a very select few. Throughout, Boelstorff addresses queer self-making practices as wide-ranging as the "style" of being *lesbi/gay* (157-80), the vexed connections between the national and local paradigm (Indonesian national culture versus/alongside local island culture), as well as the challenges such research poses for broader discourses of "sexuality, national belonging and globalization" (217-23), bringing them to bear on the tricky task of translation that is so central to his project. Boelstorff argues, for instance, that his utilization of the terms "lesbi" and "gay" denotes no easy surrender to the ubiquity of Western queer terminology, but rather signals the possibility of inhabiting these terms outside and despite their Western referents (91-123). Ultimately, it is Indonesian *lesbi/gay* subjects who "dub," even haunt, nationalist discourse and in doing so, "dub the foreign 'gay' and 'lesbian' into *gay* and *lesbi*, into a set of identifications, sexual practices . . . they feel to be authentically Indonesian" (215).

Although less ambitious in scale than Boelstorff, Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex*, on the other hand, provides an object lesson in situated and ethical ethnography. Unlike Boelstorff, Reddy does not seem as preoccupied with undoing the West-versus-the-rest binary or in foregrounding (and agonizing over) her Westernized imaginary. Rather, her book lays bare the complex question of thinking cross-cultural sexuality beyond the privileged languages of visibility and access. To do so, Reddy appropriately turns to an ethnography of *hijras* in two southern Indian cities, Hyderabad and Secunderabad, to provide an analysis of *hijras* "not just as [visibly] gendered or sexual" but as composite subjects, borne through "kinship, religion, class and hierarchies of respect" (2). Reddy points out that *hijras* have always been the fetishized bodies through which sexuality in the form of an exotic third sex or as transgendered difference travels out to the West from India. Tracking this trend historically, Reddy argues that *hijras*, to this day, continue to be the object *du jour*, fueled by the academic desire to discover and reify sexual difference in exotic elsewhere (4-16). The writing of an ethnography on, about, and with *hijras* thus requires a careful articulation of precisely such intellectual genealogies and effects.

What is striking about Reddy's contributions to such genealogies is that she makes no claims to leave such iconographies behind as she writes of *hijras*. Instead, her work is directed at making visible the very couplings of colonialism and/or globalization that undergird what she calls the "hyper (in)visibility" of such reifications.

The book's first (and arguably its best) chapter, "*Hijras, Individuality, and Izzat*," situates Reddy's claims within a triangulated set of discourses: "historical representations of *hijras*, South Asian constructions of individuality and renunciation, and analysis of *izzat*, or respect" (18). Reddy carefully charts a historiography of *hijras* across periods and genres, moving from ancient Indian philosophical and liturgical texts to medieval Perso-Urdu secondary literature, from largely British colonial literature to the more recent anthropological materials on *hijras* as third sex. Throughout, Reddy underlines the particular critical agenda that undergirds each period's peculiar articulations on and about *hijras*. Drawing from the work of early scholars, Reddy surveys a vast corpus of literature that provides "historical evidence for a pre-modern (and pre-Islamic) concept of sexuality and the category of sexual thirdness in India" (19). Yet, Reddy is quick to caution against a celebratory recovery of such Indian pasts as she details the variegated linguistic landscape (Sanskrit, Pali, Urdu) within which descriptions of *hijras* and/or third sexness appear. In other words, pre-Islamic descriptions of third sexness (that is, those that appeared prior to the arrival of the Mughals in the sixteenth century) may not in fact refer to the same set of identifications as those evoked by the later Urdu term for third sexness, "hijra." Such analytical caution is repeated in her survey of medieval Indian literature where the focus on third sexness appears in the descriptions of eunuchs who occupy key roles in royal and imperial courts but still continue to be slaves. It is this paradoxical relationship (of "alienation and intimacy") that interests Reddy, and it is one that animates and founds the larger critical project of the book.

With the advent of British colonialism, the nuances of function and location recede, and *hijras* begin to be primarily narrated through the judicial language of criminality and colonial difference. Slavery makes way for the effects of colonialism, and *hijras* appear more in the annals of "criminal castes and tribes," their heightened categorization a tribute to the taxo-

nomical project of empire. Such differentiated histories, Reddy claims, increasingly disappear in the recent anthropological literature on *hijras*, which sees them overwhelmingly as evidence of the multiplicity of sexual difference. They were, and continue to remain, firmly embedded in the narrative of a “third sex,” and rarely articulated beyond such restrictive formulations. Reddy’s exploration of *hijra* lives within the “wider (male) social universe of *kotis*” (feminine-identified males) in Hyderabad aims instead to imagine *hijra* subjectivity through a dialectical relationship between an ethics of renunciation and respect. *Hijras* come into their selves, as it were, “through constructing their individuality as renouncers, and the medium or currency through which they construct their individuality is *izzat* (respect). *Izzat* therefore emerges through this process as a central authenticating trope in *hijra* constructions of self and society” (40).

Reddy’s remaining chapters extend our understanding of *hijra* subjectivity by folding their personal histories (presented in the form of anecdotes, interviews, and casual conversations) into the very fabric of lived urban life in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. The *hijras* Reddy interviews and addresses occupy a range of self-identifying categories—*koti*, *panti*, *jogin*—and in doing so construct sexual “cartographies” that trouble any recourse to a stable language of sexual difference. *Pantis* and *kotis* may both be visibly male-identified, but their sexual practices dictate and often shift their own self-identifications. Similarly, an AC/DC (someone who both “puts in and takes out”) is also part (albeit in a despised way) of the *hijra* spectrum, as are *berupias*, or *hijra* impersonators, men who traverse the cities “faking” *hijra* rituals and behavior in the hope of earning revenue. Noteworthy here is how every one of the *hijra* categories problematizes the language of sexual difference and “highlights the contextual nature of ‘authentic’ third-sex identity” (73).

*Hijras* are rerouted not just through multiple gender formations, but also through varied community and religious practices. In her chapter, “We are all Musalmans Now,” Reddy describes her interviews with various *hijras* in Hyderabad who see themselves, overall, as “Musulmans” (a colonial term) or Muslims, despite the fact that they construct their history through a recourse to Hindu mythology. For Reddy, *hijras* emerge as “orthoprax religious practitioners” whereby their practices rather than

beliefs determine their religious orientation. Thus, even as *hijras* claim their legitimacy and source from the Hindu goddess, Bedhraj Mata, they identify principally as Muslim and practice a form of hybridized Islam that blurs the demarcated gender boundaries specified by *shari'at* (Islamic law). Such a pluralized Islamic identity renders impossible any turn to religious authenticity and is particularly noteworthy in a nation like India that for decades has wrestled with the demons of a divided Hindu/Muslim populace (110-25).

For contemporary sexuality studies, *With Respect to Sex* proposes a different script, a necessary reformulation of the terms through which *hijras* as a group of people can be narrated. As Reddy argues throughout her book, it is clear that *hijras* held positions of some power in Mughal courts and had the prerogative to collect taxes and duties in particular areas. Such connections to capital and state formation are repeatedly elided by scholars who enthusiastically mine archives and geopolitical sites in their quest to “discover” sex/gender difference. Geeta Patel, for example, cautions against such quests, reminding us that *hijras* elude such markings of sex/gender difference precisely because “they do not inhabit gender in the usual (that is, North American or European) way.” The multiply configured body of the *hijra* mandates a reading practice that nudges gendered difference through sexual difference. When *hijras* lift up their saris or skirts to register an insult in India, Patel argues, “the insult becomes almost incidental to the telling; analytic attention shifts to the ‘proof’ of their difference through anatomical revelation.” In such a literal reading practice, *hijras* such as the ones Reddy writes about are violently written out of view; *hijras* appear to have no history apart from their sexuality and have little value apart from their sexuality to those who would study them.<sup>5</sup>

Ara Wilson’s *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok* provides a further critical view of concerns that fall away in the study of cross-cultural sexualities, particularly in countries such as Thailand. She asks us to imagine the histories, effects, and products of global capitalism within and through the realms of the intimate. For Wilson, such a coupling is often seen as counterintuitive, almost antithetical to the mythology of a blind and rapacious global order efficiently and mechanically planting its seeds all over the world. As she writes, “the implicit contrast between a multina-

tional chain store and a floating market implies that modern commerce diminishes the intimate texture of public economic realms” (8). Using the example of Thailand, Wilson argues that the social and cultural systems that are so integral to the sustenance of “old-fashioned economies” are in fact equally present and functional in the movements of capitalist modernity. More specifically, Wilson demonstrates how “gender, ethnicity, and sexuality have been and continue to be centrally involved in the operations of modernizing markets” (9).

Wilson’s theorizations of the “intimate” are worth carefully considering, as they extend the often myopic understanding of sexualities to include a more textured landscape of feeling, affect, and social formation. Thus she proposes: “By intimate, I mean features of people’s daily lives that come to seem non-economic, particularly social identities (for example, woman) and relationships (for example, kinship); by calling these intimate, I mean to capture the deeply felt orientations and entrenched practices that make up what people consider to be their personal or private lives and their individual selves” (10). Although the rest of the book unevenly fulfills the promise of such provocations, Wilson does well to situate her claims within five commercial sites that stage complex scenes of “intimate economies”: department stores, tourist sex trade, popular downtown malls, telecommunications marketing office(s), and Amway and Avon (direct sales). Each analytical scene describes the imbrication of modern and local economies (a binary that is not always clear or upheld) and interrogates the extensions of commodity exchange into sexual, domestic, and romantic spaces. Throughout, Wilson explores the shifts in Thai gender systems beyond a simple focus on the materialization of women’s labor in commercial markets.

*Intimate Economies* focuses on the capitalist retail industry during the economic boom of the 1980s and the 1990s. Chapter 1, “From Shophouse to Department Store,” for example, follows the lives of the immigrant Chirathivat family (Jeng, until 1950) and their efforts to transform their small shophouse in Bangkok to the Central, their department store. Wilson is at her best when she addresses the emergent masculinities (in this case, ethnic Chinese masculinities) of the father-son duo who run the “Central Empire” and the struggles they endure as the very “meaning and

value” of Chineseness, and of Chinese businessmen, shifts and undoes itself (54-65). Chapter 2, “Economies of Intimacy in the Go-Go Bar,” the most astute of all the chapters in the book, examines the much-cited Thai sex industry and looks at the flows of exchange between foreign customers and native sex workers in a small go-go bar in Bangkok. Here, the focus is less on the sexual services that Thai women provide than on the modes of interaction and exchange they enter into with their foreign clients. The space of the go-go bar becomes a veritable global market, where Thai sex workers mobilize clients to launder monies, provide cultural services, and even work as their liaisons to the outside world. Wilson is quick to underscore such exchanges as instantiations of the sex worker’s “agency,” a mode of strategic and intimate self-articulation that threads an inherited “folk gift economy” with more commercial forms of exchange.

The remaining chapters extend the model of gendered flexibility to include an analysis of “toms” in newly developed malls, “Avon Ladies” in the mushrooming retail economies of Bangkok, and “flexible” cable consumers and producers. For example, “toms” (“boyish or mannish women”) and their feminine companions, “dees,” dot the aisles of malls in Bangkok, as both sales personnel and clients. Taking the example of the Mah Boonkrong shopping complex, Wilson argues that it is precisely the expansion of commodity exchange sites (such as malls and stores) that makes possible the visible emergence of tom-dee figures. Wilson is careful not to construct a causal relationship between mall culture and gendered bodies; the focus here is more on the particular prominence of these figures during the economic development of the 1980s and the 1990s. Such a prominence is placed alongside an analysis of how these gendered bodies transact and translate their sexualities outside the commodified space of the mall and into the very fabric of the national body-politic (110-25). Commercial diversity, it appears, oddly and compellingly promotes a set of contradictory and often alternative forms of gender diversity, a diversity that complicates the heterosexual underpinnings of capitalist and/or Thai modernity.

Taken together, the critiques and hesitations offered by the three texts reviewed here suggest that the field formation of sexuality studies has the imaginative skills to displace and transform the negative inheritance of its

own history. This imaginative turn requires each text to articulate an understanding of itself as being both inside and outside of the spaces it traverses. In the case of Boelstorff, such analytical self-reflexivity leads to some troubling self-congratulation, where the renegade scholar-ethnographer positions himself as the principal agent of cultural translation. Reddy's ethnographic project, on the other hand, often gets mired in too much self-abnegation, where authorial critique is overshadowed by a repeated surrender to her friendships with the subjects she studies. Whereas Wilson, more problematically, writes across cultures without much attentiveness to the disciplinary and disciplining languages she mobilizes to study those very cultures. Yet, even as the three texts occasionally stumble over competing intersections produced in an age of globalization, there is an equal excitement over the languages of self-renewal provided by these very struggles. Rather than disciplining the field of sexuality through an analytical "capture" of elsewhere, the three texts discussed here advocate a more robust approach to studies of sexuality under globalization. The voyage out appears, ultimately, to have no horizon.

#### NOTES

1. For an introduction to the multiple strands of this debate, see Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey, eds., "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally," Special Issue, *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999); and *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed., Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2003). See also, Ali Behdad, "On Globalization, Again!" in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 62-79. I use the term "Post-Fordism" to loosely refer to new modes of production and socioeconomic systems characterized by the rise of information technologies, consumer cultures, and the expansion of national financial markets. This term supplements "Fordism," a mode of production popularized by Henry Ford's car plants where workers performed repeated labor within the structure of a routinized production line.
2. A more detailed analysis of the entanglements of sexuality and colonialism in disciplinary discourses can be found in Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and the Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-28; and Anjali Arondekar, "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (Winter/Spring 2005): 10-27.
3. For instance, most of the recent scholarship on non-U.S. locations has predomi-

nantly focused on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is, in many ways, no time for sex elsewhere but in the here and now.

4. Ann Stoler, for example, has asked for a more nuanced “politics of comparison” that attends to the “tense and tender ties” of domains of the intimate in an increasingly variegated colonial and post-colonial landscape. See her “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 23-70.
5. Geeta Patel, “Risky Subjects: Insurance, Sexuality, and Capital,” *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (2006): 25-65.