



If one source of discomfort derived from an unwillingness of Asian studies to adequately consider critiques of area studies that partly operate by minimizing trans (and queer) perspectives, another dissatisfaction driving this special issue centered on how discussions of nonnormative embodiments have tended to reference the West. To be sure, the aforementioned surge of intellectual and activist work on the politics of nonnormative embodiment in various Asian locales was accelerated by the transnational circulation of trans vocabularies after the 1990s. Indeed, this framework clearly allowed some committed scholars and confrontational advocates to visualize and mobilize marginalized bodies as the focus of their critiques. However, we also recognize that these manifestations of trans-in-Asia must be considered in much more complex terms than what diffusionist accounts of globalization might suggest. Much of this groundbreaking work has, in fact, cautioned against immediate assumptions about the universality of transgender experiences. It also heeds the significant influence of colonial histories, cultural imperialism, Cold War dynamics, economic integration, and migration practices in shaping local categories of queerness, discourses of rights, as well as the political, social, and medical management of gender variance and nonnormative sexualities (Chiang and Wong 2017; Henry, forthcoming).

These challenging but important meditations about transnational circulation and global citationality lie at the heart of the essays that follow. Whether they seek to provincialize, decolonize, de/Cold War, and/or decolorize the category and practice of trans, the essays in this special issue explore how perspectives grounded in experiences outside the West or on its fringes might reorient how scholars of gender and sexuality as well as related fields conceptualize and narrativize trans embodiments, but without assuming that they always operate in opposition to normalizing regimes. To this end, critics have begun to illuminate the historical, linguistic, and cultural complexities of gendered selfhoods, embodiments, and practices in glocalized contexts. We hope that this focus on Asia-in-trans will allow readers to imagine new ways of thinking about these ~~minority~~ nonnormative embodiments, including their unique and uncharted histories, discrepant cultural expressions, and multiply marginalized experiences.

The authors who responded to our call to interface Asian and trans studies did so in diverse ways. In our estimation, their essays represent the exciting promise of this new field as geopolitically critical, intellectually expansive, and (inter)disciplinarily audacious. Until recently, scholars of Asia have tended to approach questions of society and culture in isomorphic and holistic ways. Imbibing the tenets of Cold War area studies, they have often assumed the stability and continuity of culture areas and their diverse populations, rather than conceiving them as held together in tenuous ways and through struggles that have privileged the interests of majority populations (e.g., the educated, propertied,

urban, male, heterosexual, and cisgender) at the expense of marginalized others (e.g., the uneducated, propertyless, female, queer, and trans). Considered in this way, trans-in-Asia does not simply or primarily function as a nonnormative identity or a ~~minority~~ subculture considered as an intrinsic, if uncommon, part of a larger whole. Rather, several authors approach this pillar of our intellectual project as a critical force that highlights how scholars have amalgamated spaces, cultures, communities, and bodies into units of analysis that enhance the visibility and welfare of majority populations, often against that of marginalized others.

For their part, other authors direct this destabilizing and decentering critique toward the second anchor of our collective pursuit—that is, Asia-in-trans. As they demonstrate, a focus on minor traditions of nonnormative embodiment, particularly ones anchored outside or on the margins of the West, expose how conceptualizations and narratives of trans tend to ossify North America, Western Europe, and other powerful centers. By contrast, they demonstrate a wider range of formulations in the non-West and global South, ones that generally have not made their way into the mainstream of scholarship, including TSQ. They also reveal that these other expressions of trans, while at times borrowing from and exhibiting some of the same characteristics as West-centered formulations, do not always rely on well-known logics of public visibility or those espousing antinormative politics as their *modus operandi*. In this diverse and wider world, Southeast Asia ~~figures~~ as a surprisingly dense node of trans expression and activity, exposing a wide variety of stories and understudied contexts. Even within a given region in the place we are provisionally calling Asia, we also witness how certain nation-states and cultural communities can dominate, subordinating other localities of trans activity in the process. As a result, the nonnormative life histories of these lesser known subjects, only some of which are captured in this special issue, have become doubly marginalized. The contributors have responded to this predicament by critically examining these cross-cutting processes of visibility/invisibility, empowerment/disenfranchisement, and centrality/peripherality.

On the broadest register, the essays that follow question uniform, consistent, and holistic understandings of trans, especially those that have come to privilege Western-centric geographies and other powerful metropolises that have similarly exerted their centrifugal forces of homogenization, subordination, and erasure. They also problematize conceptualizations of nonnormative bodies that have tended to associate the origins and trajectories of trans with the rise of a modernity driven by imperial expansion and capitalist exploitation. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Eurocentric logics used to narrate these complex histories revolves around binaries, which have powerfully separated humanity into putative groups across a wide range of spatial scales. Although commonly premised on religious, empirical, and even scientific criteria, these practices of division have often advanced processes of human and environmental (or inhuman)

domination (Luciano and Chen 2015). Slavery, imperialism, and genocide as well as androcentrism, heteronormativity, and gender conformism are but some of its most violent by-products. In response, deconstruction, postcolonial critiques, critical race theory, disability studies, and related strands of poststructuralist thinking have problematized the destructive effects of these binary frameworks. Trans can be said to have some affinity with these antifoundational politics, calling into question the seemingly natural distinction between such categories as *man* and *woman* as well as *masculine* and *feminine*. As a result, nonbinary, gender queer, and other neologisms have emerged in recent years as individual and collective strategies to make room for marginalized and heretofore unnamed subjects who do not fit the categorical by-products of dichotomizing epistemologies.

The first two essays interrogate the porous meaning and significations of *Asia*, which traffic through the social mobilization of trans categories in contemporary South Asia. Shraddha Chatterjee's essay, *Transgender Shifts: Notes on Resignation of Gender and Sexuality in India*, addresses one especially pressing debate in transnational queer studies: as Western categorizations of gender and sexuality including the very concept *transgender* have come to determine locally situated political agendas, does one espouse a model of solidarity congealed by the forces of globalization or eschew the logic of developmentalism and homogenization hidden under the same process of postcolonial hybridization? This question carries a dire urgency in the context of India because *transgender* emerged as an umbrella frame of identification only in the late 2000s as a result of transnational funding, and it has served as the epistemic cornerstone in recent key legislation, including the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill of 2014 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2016. The seduction (and perhaps danger) of *transgenderism*, in other words, is leveraged from its close ties to legal process and access to welfare. Yet, as Chatterjee reminds us, the all-encompassing appeal of *transgender* also forgets and erases by collapsing the unique norms and prescriptions of gender performance associated with diverse communities of queer subjects caught between colonialism and globalization. Each hijra community, for instance, features distinct interlinked biological, cultural, religious, and geographical specificity, and these specificities become opaque even invisible and unspeakable in the language of *transgender*. Ultimately, Chatterjee's study shows that the ground of Indianness must have also shifted to accommodate influences external to the nation, so that the flexibility of the conceptual parameters of an Asian region constitutes the very process whereby categories of gender variance work in unexpected ways with and to transform one another.

Similarly calling for a more critical approach to conceptualizing queer South Asia, Adnan Hossain's essay, *De-Indianizing Hijra: Intraregional Effacements and Inequalities in South Asian Queer Space*, aims to debunk the India-centrism that has dominated the existing scholarship on hijras. Taking into

consideration the historical significance of the partitioning of British India, Hossain's study deploys a regionally sensitive approach in order to supplant a national frame defined around Indian hegemony. Part of the problem with the growing literature on queer South Asia, Hossain suggests, lies in the power dynamics that makes invisible other regions such as Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. His ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh shows, for example, that many hijras in Dhaka can at once embody the life of a heterosexual masculine husband and that of a transgender hijra. This approach differs from existing work that tends to locate Indian hijras outside the social zones of procreative kinship and heteronormativity. In fact, many hijras travel across the Indian-Bangladesh border without a visa. As such, transregional movement not only exceeds familiar cartographical boundaries but also attests to the ways in which hijras from different regional communities unite in one imagined nation within the nations. Hossain's study demonstrates that as we pluralize our understanding of hijras, the queering of South Asia necessitates the mutual troubling of Western-centrism and Indian hegemony. The porousness of regional definition is again made evident through the malleability and mobility of trans concepts.

Emmanuel David's essay, *Transgender Archipelagos*, explores the archipelago as an analytic to theorize the coastline-like boundaries and porous edges of transgender as a collective identity and as an emergent field of study. The discontinuous, noncontinental geography of the Philippines is the site of David's ethnographic research on the queen pageants from 2009 to 2015 more broadly theorized as a spatial imaginary where multiple centers and multiple edges coexist amid shifting relations of proximity and distance. The rich ethnographic detail of David's research decenters the Philippines as a nation by demonstrating the multilingual and interisland dynamics among the pageant contestants, whose heterogeneous gender embodiments and practices also defamiliarize transgender as an identity category.

The essays by Horim Yi and Timothy Gitzen and by Benjamin Hegarty analyze the varied and contested place of trans selves in developmental regimes and historical dictatorships across East and Southeast Asia. As background to their ethnographic and critical inquiries, they explain how Cold War governments in South Korea and Indonesia took a remarkably deep interest in marking, policing, and managing gender and sexual boundaries of (non)normativity. Worked out in a complex dialogue with military officials, medical doctors, and media professionals, these definitions set (but did not determine) the social parameters for such important processes as capitalist accumulation, national defense, and cultural conformity. Although focused on different experiences of such boundary-marking processes, these authors demonstrate how trans subjects were caught up in nation-building processes that disproportionately exposed

them to media scrutiny, medical inspection, and economic privation. To varying degrees, trans subjects could also find support from like-minded people, with whom they associated to create subcultural communities or organized in the creation of solidarity.

In the case of Indonesia, Hegarty explores the historical significance of waria, individuals whose situated practices of male femininity brought them into visibility and censure as well as struggle and glamour during the 1960s. Set against the backdrop of Suharto's New Order (1967-68), his interdisciplinary essay combines archival documents, oral histories, and photographic images to explore the changing relationship between gender presentation and understandings of the self. To be sure, this dynamic era witnessed many denunciations of transgressive male bodies that crossed culturally accepted boundaries of embodiment, leading to instances of public denunciation and everyday violence. Hegarty also documents how, ironically, binary definitions of bodies created a considerably malleable stage onto which waria entered as social actors and historical agents. Redirecting discussions of trans practices away from an understanding of self that mirrors external markers (and vice versa), he explores the life history of Tadi, whose glamorous practices of female embodiment on- and offstage transformed her into a waria. Through her own words and photographs as well as media accounts about her, Hegarty unpacks how Tadi and other waria managed to achieve female gender presentations. These narratives of accomplishment, as he calls them, coexisted with the goal-oriented pursuits of an authoritarian state. Even as Hegarty understands the temporary but daily performances of male femininity as a function of structural conditions and national terms of development, he demonstrates how Tadi redirected them toward individual pursuits of self-cultivation and avowed rites of communal recognition. He also explains the complex role of the mass media and other forms of public visibility, which waria used to claim cultural citizenship and national belonging. Tadi's own photographs, some of which Hegarty has included, function as an archival index of how stigmatizing technologies of mechanical reproduction were reoriented toward presenting oneself as upstanding, productive, and modern in Indonesia's New Order.

If Hegarty's essay focuses on the ways in which waria managed to fashion a glamorous and dignified position within and against Indonesia's developmentalist order, Yi and Gitzen's discussion of the South Korean military demonstrates how this powerful institution severely limited the life choices of trans subjects, subjecting them to normalizing forms of violence that separated their bodies from their embodied sense of selves. In a manner similar to Suharto's imposition of the New Order, Park Chung Hee laid the foundations for capitalist growth in South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, state-led policies of rapid industrialization

were closely tied to Cold War imperatives, including the defense of this anti-communist nation against its North Korean neighbor. Analyzing the current weight of this ongoing history, Yi and Gitzen illustrate how South Korea's formula of militarized modernity impinges on variant bodies who, like their cisgender counterparts, were mobilized to promote state directives. Just as political officials refused to countenance opposition to its binary formula of capitalist supporters (patriots) and alleged detractors (communists), military and medical officials in charge of recruiting soldiers relied on a rigid system of sexual dimorphism to separate eligible men from ineligible women. As a result, South Korean bodies in transition—for example, those of people assigned male at birth but who desired to become women—whether subjectively and/or objectively, have been subjected to intense scrutiny and collective pressure. Despite the recent efforts of queer activists, they continue to face considerable challenges to ensure their bodily and mental health in the context of conscription. Yi and Gitzen poignantly recount how young transwomen are burdened with the difficult task of fulfilling the military's inflexible categories of anatomical binarism to gain an exemption, often by hurriedly removing their testicles. Or, if they cannot meet these medical standards in time for service or, for whatever reason, desire to serve in the military before further transitioning, they must do so with a body that the armed forces (and most of South Korean society) still considers less valuable to its highly gendered system of national defense and cultural citizenship. Even transmen who have legally changed their sex can perform military service but do so in a capacity that marks them as lower ranking than their biological male counterparts. Young transpeople in South Korea thus reveal how a binary system of gender that developed in the harsh context of the Cold War continues to produce the ironic effect of establishing a hierarchy of soldiering bodies, not all of which count in the same capacity.

Prathna Lourd and Robert Diaz's essays both reconceptualize trans as a framework for interpreting cinematic representations while offering two very different critical approaches. Lourd's elegant essay unravels a Lacanian reading of the daydream in renowned Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015). Lourd's poetic interpretation of Weerasethakul's signature dream motif as an aesthetic rendering of transgender demonstrates a new way to (re)see (or, rather, dream) trans on-screen not as a visible embodiment or intelligible identity but as a set of relations across the (un)knowable and the (im)possible. Diaz's essay examines two recent films from the Philippines: *Out Run* (2016), a documentary that follows Ladlad (LGBT Party)'s unsuccessful congressional bid during the 2013 election, and *Die Beautiful* (2016), a drama about the trials and tribulations of a trans beauty queen. The essay focuses on the complex and heterogeneous expressions of *kabaklaan*, a not readily translatable

gender/sexual category that approximates but is not reducible to transgender. Diaz shows how kabaklaan has continued to manifest across different generational and class contexts, in both harmful and empowering ways. Through an intersectional examination of how queer and trans subjects in the *bars* navigate the politics of respectability, the essay suggests that the quotidian performance of kabaklaan can turn seemingly trivial or frivolous spaces into sites of creative resistance and solidarity in times of personal, political, and economic trauma.

As mentioned earlier, nonbinary neologisms have emerged in recent years to bring to light heretofore marginalized or unnamed subjects in the anti-foundational politics of the trans continuum. Even as these efforts have created a more hospitable living space for those who do not comfortably identify with one of these two terms, they have not necessarily dismantled the binary logic out of which such transgressive expressions emerged. For example, invocations of nonbinary, as the term discloses, holds on to the originary dichotomy as its primary referent. By contrast, the essay by Zairong Xiang proffers an even more radical response to the historic legacy of binaries. Rereading classical Chinese concepts as an intellectual resource for contemporary debates, Xiang seeks to further problematize the critique of sexual/gender dualisms. For example, heteronormativity and cisnormativity that often appear in trans and queer studies, even in their most edgy forms. Xiang develops an innovative theoretical framework that he calls *transdualism*, which refers to a mode of analysis that stays below rather than beyond dualistic thinking and relates the polarities of any cultural binary through the conjunction of *neither . . . and* rather than *neither . . . or*. The most ambitious intervention of this transdualism theory revolves around the long-standing acrimony between corporeal materiality and linguistic determinism in queer and trans theorizations. An earlier variant of this debate surfaced in Jay Prosser's materialist critique of Judith Butler's work. Xiang picks up this debate from Gayle Salamon, who advocates the rhetorical productivity of psychoanalytic concepts as a way of ameliorating this debate. With transdualism, Xiang relates the corporeal materiality stance to the linguistic determinism position through an *neither . . . and* formulation. As such, this transing demands an understanding of trans experience as either loaded with corporeal-materialist significance and saturated with the discursive operations of language. Thus staying below rather than beyond the binary oppositions liberates us from a one-sided theoretical totality, while simultaneously forcing us to attend to the power dynamics of their interrelation. In this way, Xiang's essay shatters the intellectual hegemony of Western theory that tends to assign Asian texts and contexts to a secondary order of importance; instead, Asia serves as the origin of a theory proper that can potentially reorient the intellectual premise of Western poststructuralist empiricism.

In addition to full-length research articles, this special issue features shorter position papers to represent the diversity of practices and problematics in trans scholarship and activism. The four short essays collected in this issue ascertain the multiple meanings of *trans* as experienced by queer subjects in different parts of Asia. Resonating with Hegarty's analysis of how technology mediates the relationship between trans self-fashioning and the historical conditions of the state, Jun Zubillaga-Pow's essay develops the concept of *trans aesthetics* to probe the agency of transwomen as they appear before the camera in different historical contexts. To unpack the materialist ontology of trans photographic modeling, Zubillaga-Pow focuses on the corporeal presentation, fashion sensibility, and attitude toward posing of transwomen in Singapore. Drawing on oral history and visual analysis, Zubillaga-Pow argues that such a materialist ontology is best delineated by comparing two historic turning points in the city-state's rapidly evolving political economy, the 1980s and the 2010s. Posing in front of the camera represents a voluntary technique employed by transwomen to situate their diverse expressions of queer embodiment as Singapore's political and economic climates shifted from the Cold War to the neoliberal era.

Whereas Zubillaga-Pow unveils trans experience in Southeast Asia through photographic mediation, Ausma Bernotaite, Lukas Berredo, and H.c Zhuo offer an incisive report of the *Trans China 2016* summit held in Ningbo. This conference report provides a rare and valuable understanding of how trans is being worked out as an activist practice. The first nationwide conference of its kind, the summit brought together activists and advocates working in different parts of China. Although only twenty-one participants attended the summit, they constitute the key leaders doing transgender activist and advocacy work in contemporary China. Their views represent the diversity of problems faced by different regional transgender communities. The conference highlighted the urgent need to reform trans-specific health-care and legal issues. These issues include concerns about the mental health of transpeople and their lack of adequate knowledge about body modification practices. Relatedly, the legal implications of gender transitioning, such as the gap in policies between altering ID cards, university diplomas, and birth certificates and the requirement of parental consent even for minor surgeries, leave ample room for improvement. Whether understood through artistic expression in Singapore or activist and advocacy work in China, trans signifies a plurality of experience as individuals embody it and obstacles arise from its social expression.

The short essays by Shi-Yan Chao and Yiu Fai Chow offer thoughtful snapshots of the creativity and resilience of individual trans lives. Chao's *Trans Formations of Male Falsetto* considers the challenges faced by male falsettos through a sympathetic portrait of Stephen Chen, a male falsetto and video maker in Singapore. Chow's *Yao, More or Less Human* presents an inspiring portrait of

Kiki, a trans sex work activist in Hong Kong. The essays movingly highlight how an artist and an activist negotiate their gender nonconformity with humor, resourcefulness, and grace. Both authors root on the complexity of linguistically or musically specific gender expressions, while also exploring their own relation and solidarity with the subjects they profile.

As a whole, this special issue engages with the critical possibilities of the regional rather than the national or transnational as a meaningful framework for analysis. The essays demonstrate that any analytical deployment of a culture area in Asia for instance must note its porous, incoherent, contradictory, and contested character. In a survey of scholarship on queer Asian cinema, Audrey Yue explains the strategy of critical regionalism in this way:

As critical regionalism, the Asian queerscape is a research practice that has emerged as a result of challenging the US-centrism of queer studies and the boundedness of area studies. Destabilizing dominant cinematic gender and sexual norms, it draws together two research approaches: (1) the new worlds of queer Asian media cultures created through the globalization of LGBT cultures and (2) the oblique spaces of non-heteronormativity reclaimed and reinvented on the margins of straight (mainstream, official, colonial) spaces. (2014: 149)

In framing Asia through queer regionalism, Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong have also made a strong case for overturning the idea unconscious within existing dominant forms of queer studies, in which certain geographical areas, nations, and regions within the purview of European and American empires get studied and easily recognized (2016: 1646). To queer the transnational turn in gender and sexuality studies this way is to attend to the many regions of the world in which European and American empires gained uneven and incomplete footholds (1646).

The various contributions to this special issue exemplify such strategies of critical regionalism or queer regionalism. Through historical, ethnographic, as well as media research, they show how gender and sexual categories such as hijra (Hosseini, Chatterjee), waria (Hegarty), kabaklaan (Diaz), and yao (Chow) are constructed, lived, and negotiated through encounters with colonial and Cold War histories as well as the globalization of LGBTQ identities, while at the same time revealing the never-entirely effaced radical edges (David) of hetero-, cis-, homo-, and transnormative categories. Framing the study of gender and sexual variance within this diverse and contested region also reveals dynamics of power that are not otherwise legible. For example, Hosseini's ethnographic research on Bangladesh exposes the Indian-centric tendency of scholarship on hijra, while David's focus on Cebu decenters Manila as a default site for analyzing trans beauty

pageants in the Philippines. Aside from its critique of regional power dynamics, a critical regional approach also allows for alternative points of reference. Instead of understanding gender variance in Asia through globalized, national, or local categories, a critical regional approach attends to how *cross-currents* circulate, permeate, infuse, and change direction (David) across the heterogeneities of the region.

The critical importance of intraregional *Qs* has long animated queer and trans scholarship and activism based in Asia. From the *1st* Queer Asian studies conference (*Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia*) held in 2005 in Bangkok, which featured multiple panels on trans issues that brought Asia-based scholars and activists together for the *1st* time, to the 2006 special issue of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* titled *Trans/Asia, Trans/gender* (Martin and Ho 2006), to the establishment of Hong Kong University Press's *Queer Asia* book series (one of its titles *Queer Bangkok* is reviewed in this issue) in 2008, scholars have made ongoing efforts to explicitly foster an alternative intellectual and activist context within the region where lateral conversations and solidarities can *flourish* around the edges of the global conduit of LGBTQ studies and activism that is still largely centered in the West. In a similar spirit, a regional approach invites us to read the articles in this special issue in reference to each other. Doing so enables us to ask a new set of questions. For example: How may the archipelago imaginary challenge the spatial imaginary of trans studies and activism not only in the West but also in dominant Asian nations such as China or India? How do gender identities such as *hijra* and *waria*, or gendered expressions such as *yao* and *byuti*, relate to each other rather than to LGBTQ?

These regional points of reference serve to provincialize and reorient the often taken-for-granted universality of LGBTQ trajectory in North America. In contrast to how trans delinks from gay and lesbian to emerge as an identity and analytic of its own, the regional histories and practices in most Asian contexts show that gender and sexual identities continue to remain entangled even in the face of the globalizing pressure to become separate. The difficulty of articulating such entanglement in the current terms of trans studies remains a challenge, one that is manifest in the regrettable absence in this special issue of scholarship on transmasculine embodiments, practices, and representations in Asia, despite a rich array of existent scholarship on topics such as *ftm* scenes in Japan (Yuen 2016), male cross-dressing performances in Chinese and Japanese theatrical arts (Jiang 2009; Robertson 1998), *tomboy* subcultures in China and Singapore (Huang 2015; Kam 2014; Yue 2017), and *FTL* embodiments in Indonesia and Thailand (Blackwood 2010; Sinnot 2004; Wilson 2004). Are these vibrant and interconnected transmasculine phenomena somehow perceived to be incongruent to trans, or in closer proximity to queer or lesbian, and thus outside the purview of our issue or of trans studies generally? What can be done to pluralize

or decenter trans studies in a way that what remains fuzzy in its rearview mirror can come into its focus? These remain worthy conversations for the future.

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#### Note

1. In recent years, the usage of trans\* (with an asterisk) has provoked some controversy (Serano 2015), especially among some activists who object to what they see as the term's inaccessibility and transmisogyny. Others, like the student activist group Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER 2018), argue that they see nothing inherently problematic with the usage of trans\* but nonetheless decided to stop using the asterisk because it seems unnecessary. We have also opted to use trans<sup>1</sup> which is efficacious as both verb and adjective in our introduction while respecting each author's choice to use or not use the asterisk in the articles.

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