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### Where Health and Beauty Meet: Femininity and Racialisation in Thai Cosmetic Surgery Clinics

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# Where Health and Beauty Meet: Femininity and Racialisation in Thai Cosmetic Surgery Clinics

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In the postmodern, high-speed city of Bangkok, health and beauty are everywhere conjoined: on Skytrain station billboards advertising the latest lines of designer whitening creams and on the facades of the many hospitals and clinics advertising laser teeth whitening, facelifts, cosmetic surgeries and rejuvenation therapies. According to the advertisements, one might assume that the dominant conception of beauty within Thai culture signifies skin bleaching, double fold eyelid surgery and nose surgery, teeth whitening and so on. Like most other states in the globalised world, Thailand is situated in a transnational racialised economy of representation that associates beauty, success, modernity and progress with whiteness. Bangkok is also known as the “Mecca” of gender reassignment surgery (GRS). The large population of local gender variant people, sometimes known as “ladyboys” or *kathoey* – male-bodied people who are generally understood to present as feminine or pass as women – is matched by transgendered travellers from elsewhere who visit Thailand to obtain GRS.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I explore the implications of the intersections between race, beauty and gender in the beautification and gender transformation practices of subjects who, while they occupy the same geographical location and are interpellated into similar globalised politics of the body, nonetheless enact their relationships to those politics in very different ways.<sup>2</sup> I began this article as a rudimentary exploration of questions that arose in the course of ethnographic research in Thailand on gender reassignment surgical tourism. This article is an attempt to trace the differences I saw between how Thai and non-Thai patients at the same clinics or hospitals, undergoing the same procedures, interpreted what they were doing. I began to think about the different racialised significations of surgical procedures obtained by different Thai and non-Thai gender variant populations in Bangkok. However, it

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has become apparent, in reading the desires for beautification of Thai transgendered subjects, that it is too simple to read this as a desire for Euro-American “whiteness”. This complex question of racialisation will be discussed below. Surgical procedures that work towards an aesthetic of standardised beauty, such as rhinoplasty and double fold eyelid surgery, may indeed circulate in a racial economy as objects of aspiration for Thai transgendered subjects. This economy, however, is far more complex than a straightforward critique of racialisation can allow for. It also indexes class, Sino-Thai understandings of the relationship of facial features to future prosperity, and Thai aspirations for modernity. This paper attempts to map the complexity of those co-existing desires for particular forms of embodied beauty and the techniques practised to obtain them by situating them in the context of globalisation and modernity.

The first part of this essay illustrates the complexity of different tropes of racialised beauty by drawing a comparison between *kathoey* and non-Thai transgender ideals of feminine desirability that coexist and are equally supported by the clinics and hospitals that provide gender reassignment and cosmetic surgical services in Bangkok. Popular media images of *kathoey* in Thai beauty pageants present *kathoey* as not merely ultra-feminine, but also pale-skinned and “Westernised”. Some non-Thai trans women undergoing gender reassignment surgeries in Thai gender clinics, however, associated Thainess with an idealised form of beauty.<sup>3</sup> They had an Orientalised view of Thai femininity and incorporated it into their own bodily presentation through tattoos or fashion. These contradictory desires – white desire for “Oriental” beauty, and Thai desire for “white” beauty – could be read as exemplifying the hegemony of “Western” standards of beauty in the global marketplace, where health and beauty become equivalent forms of commodity fetish.<sup>4</sup> In centres such as Yanhee International Hospital in Bangkok (whose slogan, “Where health and beauty meet”, furnished me with the title of this essay), ideas about health are conflated with particular, historically and geographically specific ideas about beauty. Yet it would be a mistake to read such cultural formations simply as a binary mirroring structure. Thus, in the second section, I contend that dominant Thai conceptions of beauty may be inflected by other understandings, and more crucially, the signification of pale skin as a classed physical feature, rather than purely a racialised signifier. By taking into account these other understandings, I argue, we can deploy a strategy for reading the politics of beauty and racialisation in Thai biomedicine that neither discounts the significance of the geocultural racialisation of whiteness as desirable, nor makes the Eurocentric assumption that non-Western others will always desire a European whiteness. In the final part of this article, I argue that the specificity of these desires and identifications within transgender cultural practices in Thailand reveals a confluence of body modification practices, commodity fetishism and the production of gendered subjectivities, and the relationship of these processes to global modernities.

In the context of the simultaneous intensified commodification and globalisation of the human body and its capacities, relationships between corporeality and desire are becoming increasingly complex. Markets for particular biomedical practices are at the forefront of this process of globalisation and commodification. The human organ trade, for example, illustrates the new “complexity of the relation between the category of the person and the commodity form that it both opposes and subtends”

(Frow, 1997, p. 162). This new complexity is mirrored in other forms of globalised body markets, particularly cosmetic surgery, where the aim is not to extend life but to transform a person's "appearance". As Kathy Davis has argued, this generally refers back to identity and a person's self-experience of corporeality rather than mere "surface" (Davis, 2003, p. 16). In a Thai context, this ideal relates to the circulation of feminine beauty as a standard-bearer for Thai nationalism, and as emblematic of Thai governmental aspirations to modernity and status as a developed nation, while retaining the specificity of "traditional" Thainess (van Esterik, 1996, pp. 211–16). The feminine body is often the site at which the conflicts arising from this straddling of tradition and modernity play out. From the perspective of the non-Thai tourist, these same images of "Thai beauty" represent a form of idealised femininity that is both desired as exotic and culturally appropriated or "eaten" (hooks, 2001, p. 427).

In theorising the practices of gender transformation in this essay, and their concomitant racialisations, I want to emphasise that these commodification practices are inextricably tied to the production of forms of embodiment, on one hand, and the circulation of global capital on the other. Here I draw on Susan Stryker's designation of somatechnics as an object of critical dialogue.<sup>5</sup> For Susan Stryker, somatechnics designates "the interconnections between embodiment, technology, and bodily practice". Stryker continues,

the material intelligibility of the body (*soma*) [is] inseparable from the techniques and technologies (*technics*) in and through which bodies are formed and transformed (2007, p. 1).

Beauty can be said to circulate as a somatic technique, a way of knowing or practising embodied technologies that also involves the production of knowledges about particular (gendered) subjectivities. Equally, beauty is inextricable from the politics of consumption and commodification. Given that forms of embodiment also circulate as commodities, and have a different relationship with technology from the broad categories of the "social" or "cultural", it seems appropriate to theorise a specific form of capital that applies to the nexus between embodiment and technology, which I refer to here as somatechnical capital.<sup>6</sup> The concept of somatechnical capital draws attention to the exchange value of practices of transforming the body. Like cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 96), somatechnical capital functions as a form of knowledge that confers status on its bearer: bodily techniques become forms of conspicuous consumption and tactics for the exercise of distinction. Here the body cannot be thought of as simply a product. There is no logical conclusion of the processes of (self) production. Somatechnical capital circulates in a context where bodies are subject to an accelerated and open-ended process of transformation, according to the shifting values of what is desirable, commodifiable and in demand.<sup>7</sup>

Before moving on, I want to briefly comment on the distinctions made in this essay between "cosmetic" or "aesthetic" surgeries and gender reassignment surgeries.<sup>8</sup> By cosmetic surgery, I refer to any surgical procedure whose purpose is to aesthetically improve an individual's physical appearance. Gender reassignment surgeries refer to surgical procedures performed for the purpose of transforming the secondary sex characteristics of the human body. While GRS is often used to denote

genital reconstruction, non-genital surgeries that transform the gendered appearance of bodies are equally, if not more, prevalent, and are regarded by many gender variant people as equally or more important than genital surgery in the overall transformation of an individual from one gender to another. Thus, there may be significant overlaps between what might be classed as “cosmetic surgery” in one context and “gender reassignment surgery” in another. In a Euro-American context different regimes of psychiatric diagnosis and “suitability” govern which are perceived to be “aesthetic” procedures and which are “transsexual” procedures. Calls have been made within trans theory for gender reassignment surgery to be renamed as cosmetic surgery in order to delink the pathologisation of transsexuality from requests for surgery (Sullivan, 2006, p. 553; Halberstam, 1996, pp. 55–56),<sup>9</sup> but significant debate rages over whether the user-pays discourse governing cosmetic procedures might delegitimise claims for gender reassignment surgeries to be covered under public healthcare systems. Meanwhile, theorists such as Davis liken cosmetic surgery to transsexual surgery, claiming that both women who request cosmetic procedures and trans people desire surgery in order to feel “at home” in their bodies (Davis, 1998, p. 304).<sup>10</sup> These distinctions and comparisons between “cosmetic” and “gender reassignment” surgeries, however, are geoculturally specific: in Thailand, the distinctions are far messier. As will become clear, understandings of particular surgical procedures as “gender reassignment” or “aesthetic” demarcate precisely how differently subjects may interface with the same structures in the same locations.

### **Two Things that Go Together**

“MTF transsexuals and cosmetic surgeries are the two things that go together,” reads a testimonial on *sexchangecenter.com*, the website for Yanhee International Hospital’s Bangkok sex reassignment surgery clinic.<sup>11</sup> This testimonial is by Thantapol Yongtrakul, or Nong Bird, a patient at Yanhee International Hospital but also a *kathoey* celebrity who won the 2003 Miss Tiffany Universe competition. Miss Tiffany is a *kathoey* cabaret show in the tourist resort town Pattaya: the same group runs an annual, nationally televised *kathoey* beauty pageant called Miss Tiffany Universe. Another testimonial writer for *sexchangecenter.com* is Nong Tum, a famous former Muay Thai boxing competitor and *kathoey* whose story was featured in the Thai-language film *Beautiful Boxer* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003). The website is styled in several shades of pink, with sparkling animated stars across the top of the page. Against this background, five women are laughing and smiling in the polite, decorous manner that embodies the iconic representation of traditional Thai femininity (van Esterik, 2000, p. 154).

Because websites and word of mouth constitute the main marketing strategy for Thai gender reassignment clinics, the intended readers of this English-language site are undoubtedly non-Thai trans women who are considering gender reassignment surgery. The website design makes an explicit connection between feminising physical surgical procedures and Thai feminine beauty. The statement I cite above, that MTF transsexuals and cosmetic surgeries go together, might be read by those English-speaking readers as expressing the familiar logic that a transsexual woman’s sense of embodied completeness is only accomplished through genital reassignment surgery. The word “cosmetic”, however, sitting side by side with representations of

*kathoeys* who have had very visible facial surgeries, might be read very differently within a Thai context. As I argue below, the words “cosmetic surgery” in relation to gender variance signify a radically different cohort of surgical procedures within *kathoeys* subculture, obtained for reasons that may be less about aspiring to a *traditional* form of Thai beauty, and more about aspiring towards an eminently modern, cosmopolitan and racialised beauty. By making such a comparison I want to illustrate how different ideals of Thai femininity circulate as objects of desiring identification for Thai and non-Thai gender variant populations within the same spaces. By “desiring identification”, I mean the sense in which models of feminine aesthetics work as somatechnic ideals that particular gender variant subjects might aspire to embody. What might it mean that in Thailand, transgendered persons “go together” with the intensified beautification of the feminine body? What forms of desire and commodification do these representations articulate?

First, let us explore how an apparently “traditional” iconography of Thai femininity might work as an ideal for some non-Thai, and particularly white, trans women who travel to Thailand to obtain gender reassignment surgery. In global transgender communities Thailand is the “Mecca” of gender reassignment surgeries: a number of plastic surgeons in Bangkok, Phuket and elsewhere operate on a clientele primarily composed of non-Thai trans women.<sup>12</sup> While many *kathoeys* are unable to afford gender reassignment surgery (Winter, 2002; Brummelhuis, 1999, p. 130), non-Thai trans women from more affluent nations are able to pay higher prices for GRS. Their patronage of Thai surgeons constitutes a market that both pre-existed and constitutes a niche within the already booming Thai medical tourism industry.

In the course of fieldwork tracing the development of this new medical tourist market,<sup>13</sup> I found that for some American and European (and white) trans women, travelling to Thailand for gender reassignment surgery not only represents corporeal feminisation through the cut of the surgeon’s knife, but also means coming into contact with a desirable and emulatable ideal of “traditional” Thai femininity.<sup>14</sup> What I mean by “traditional” Thai femininity here indexes a familiar stereotypical representation of “Oriental” womanhood. According to this stereotype, Thai femininity is seen as both premodern, associated with the exotic commodities of the Thai tourist trade such as silk, traditional dance forms or Buddhist representations of goddesses, and “superfeminine, submissive, mysterious [and] desirable” (Manderson, 1997, p. 125). The Orientalism of this image of Thai femininity has been explored in a heteronormative framework of Western masculine desire for the “good Thai woman” (Manderson, 1997, pp. 136–43; Hamilton, 1997, pp. 152–54), but has been less explored as a site of emulation and identification by Western women, or trans women.

An example of this emulation is the story of Melanie, a trans woman from the Midwestern United States. I met Melanie at a clinic near Pattaya in 2007.<sup>15</sup> She was on her second trip to Thailand and was about to have facial feminisation surgery; her long-term goal was to eventually return for genital surgery. On a previous trip to the same clinic for breast augmentation, Melanie had discovered a painting of a Thai goddess in a shopping mall near her hotel. The painting, she explained, was “a representation of a goddess of earth – feminine grace and beauty” (Interview with Melanie, Pattaya, 2007). She identified with the painting so strongly that back home

in the United States, she hired a tattooist to reproduce the mermaid goddess on her shoulder, as a marker of what the journey to Thailand meant to her. The tattoo literally inscribes Melanie's body with a racialised and gendered somatechnic, which works to commemorate and mark the somatechnic of surgical transformation.<sup>16</sup>

This association between the Thai iconicity of feminine "grace and beauty" and self-transformation, I discovered, was a pervasive pattern of affective experience for Euro-American transgender medical tourists. Melanie and other non-Thai trans women experienced Thailand not only as the site of their reassignment surgeries, but as a geocultural space that enabled them to supplement their own sense of psychic feminisation. Melanie narrated this experience of psychic feminisation as an effect of her understandings of the greater importance of "proper" feminine beauty within Thai culture: grace and beauty were, she said, much more important in Thailand than in America.

Embodied feminisation is also assisted materially at gender reassignment clinics. In one clinic a *kathoe* make-up artist held classes in applying cosmetics for the non-Thai trans clientele as a convalescent activity. Manicures and pedicures were part of the service provided by the clinic, along with hairdressing appointments, Thai massage and traditional Thai cookery classes. On one visit to a Thai gender reassignment clinic, I met two Dutch women, one of whom had had gender reassignment surgery the year before. On both days I visited, they were dressed in brilliantly coloured, elaborate pink and blue gowns of Thai silk made by a tailor in Pattaya. Unable to dress up as distinctively in their daily lives in Europe, this surgical "holiday" was an opportunity for both women to indulge their desires to perform a more elaborate and more feminine accoutrement. One could read these services as an example of standard services offered by resorts, but in this context, beautification "the Thai way" also seemed to supplement patients' sense of themselves as feminine.

I want to return now to a discussion of the very different ideal of Thai femininity circulating within a *kathoe* context. This means returning to consider the significance of Nong Bird's testimonial about "cosmetic surgery" and MTF transsexuals going together. Instead of understanding Nong Bird's use of the phrase "cosmetic surgery" as relating to genital surgery, we might understand it to relate to other forms of bodily modification: breast enhancement, double fold eyelid surgery or nose reshaping surgeries. As if to support this reading, the *kathoe* models depicted on [sexchangecenter.com](http://sexchangecenter.com) are all classically beautiful in a manner that is both specific to the cosmopolitan, ultra-modern iconography of Thai media and advertising, and recognisable across Southeast Asia. The models possess shaped, narrow noses and eyelids with double folds; unlike many Thais, they have flawlessly pale skin. The pictured testimonial writers, Nong Bird and Nong Tum, are no exception.

The idea that desirable Thai trans feminine beauty may be accomplished through cosmetic or aesthetic surgeries can be found not only at the level of representation on hospital marketing websites, but also within a constellation of Thai gender variant social practices. The nationally televised *kathoe* beauty pageants such as Miss Tiffany Universe, Miss International Queen and Miss Alcazar Purple Crown all feature contestants for whom facial cosmetic surgeries are par for the course (Wong, 2005, p. 7; Saniotis, 2007). *Kathoe* beauty pageant contestants are usually managed by agents, who customarily organise hairdressing, make-up and training in

deportment as well as sending aspiring contestants to a surgeon for more permanent “beautification”.<sup>17</sup> *Kathoey* on the whole have a reputation in Bangkok culture for embodying ultra-femininity via the technologies of surgical transformation. In fact, anecdotal and academic research suggests that *kathoey* are far more likely to seek “aesthetic” surgical procedures such as rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, eyelid surgery and silicon injections than genital reassignment. According to the available research (far too little has been written on this subject), *kathoey* subcultures tend to place a greater value on the enhancement of facial or surface beauty than on genital reconstruction, or the removal of the penis. This focus on surface beauty is consistent with broader discourses about modern beauty in Thailand for non gender variant women (van Esterik, 2000, p. 154). It may also be attributed to the fact that genital reassignment surgery is prohibitively expensive, and many *kathoey* can only find employment in industries such as cabaret or sex work where maintaining a standard of physical beauty is necessary to continue employment (Sukontapatipark, 2005, p. 95). “Improving” one’s physical appearance through aesthetic surgery, however, is seen as fashionable and desirable for many *kathoey*, far more so than genital surgery. For example, a contributor to Matzner and Costa’s 2007 collection of *sao praphet sorng* personal narratives writes,

If I have a sex-change operation, people will think I am even more strange. . . If I did have surgery, I would have it especially for my face in order to improve my looks. For example, something like nose surgery (Costa and Matzner, 2007, p. 63).<sup>18</sup>

For *kathoey* who may not desire, or who are unable to afford, genital surgical reassignment, cosmetic surgeries may provide a more accessible avenue to femininity. Wong observes that “many [*kathoey*] have no qualms about going for cosmetic surgery to enhance their feminine looks, but many of them are in no hurry to go for sex-reassignment surgery” (2005, p. 12). He writes that “[c]osmetic surgery is also necessary to give [*kathoey*] feminine features, such as breasts, high-bridged noses, sharp chins and a more contoured body” (2005, p. 7).

While I am unwilling to generalise, as this author does, that all *kathoey* might find such aesthetic surgeries necessary, or to dismiss the possibility that femininity is as vexed and multiplicitous a discourse for *kathoey* in Thailand as it clearly is for other subjects in other sites, I am interested in drawing attention to another layer of meaning in the above quote. There is an interesting slippage in the quoted essay as well as in the larger cultural practices around cosmetic surgery. How do high-bridged noses enhance one’s “feminine features”? And given the high proportion of *kathoey* who also have double fold eyelid surgery at the same time, how does a deeper fold in the upper eyelid enhance femininity? Provisionally, we could argue that these connections between cosmetic surgeries and Thai transgender embodiment demonstrate the inseparable enmeshment of ideals of gendered embodiment with racialisation (not to mention class politics and modernity, which I look at below). However, a small irony lurks in the juxtaposition of these two contradictory and cross-cultural concepts of a trans feminine ideal. On one hand, white trans women (and I use this term under erasure)<sup>19</sup> appropriate what they understand to be “Thai femininity”, premised on its otherness and its proximity to stereotypically

“traditional”, non-modern practices and artefacts: goddesses, silk, cuisine. On the other hand, the *kathoe*y ideal of feminine beauty is entirely postmodern, technologically enhanced – and, moreover, potentially premised on the desirability of whiteness.

### “Whiteness” in Thailand

As Edward Said argued, the imagined features of the Orient include “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1995, p. 63). Thailand is a site in which Orientalism operates as a dominant tourist discourse. To speak about Orientalism within the contemporary glocalised world, however, begs the question – for whom is Thai culture exotic? Drawing attention to the detachment of Orientalist discourses from a binary structure between “East” and “West” outside Euro-America, Mackie suggests that the terminology of Orientalism could shift to speaking of a “metropolitan gaze” (Mackie, 2000, para 38). This observation that the fetishisation of difference takes place in contexts outside what Said recognised as classic Orientalism offers a corrective to the assumption that cultural exoticism operates merely as a tool of the [white] West. Morris points to the fantasy of Thailand as a “place of beautiful order and orderly beauty” and simultaneously a place wherein anything goes, whose spaces and people are “responsive to all desire” (1997, p. 61). This fantasy is always already racialised and gendered, often iconised in the image of the responsive Thai woman – and according to Morris, also in the image of the *kathoe*y.

If we can account in these ways for the exoticisation of Thai femininity by non-Thai trans women, how can we account for the desirability of white skin, narrow noses and “Western”-looking eyes amongst Thais? While speaking of race as a biological or cultural “fact” is of no use here, examining processes of racialisation as a discursive “process by which racial meanings gain content and power” may be more effective (King-O’Riain 2006, p. 7). Within this broader context of racialisation, “whiteness” almost always refers to something we could also call European, or what in Australia is sometimes called “Anglo”: a person with pale skin, blue or green eyes, and (stereotypically) blonde hair. Following Fanon, we might stress also that whiteness as an ideal also works on an individual level, as something that can be desired, or disavowed (Fanon, 1991, p. 11).

In Thailand, as elsewhere, whiteness has multivalent significations and values. On one hand, it can represent cultural and economic value. Dominant Thai attitudes towards whiteness as a physical assemblage of bodily features, however, are very different from ideologies of specifically *racial* whiteness that one might find in Anglophone contexts. In Thailand, whiteness is implicitly connoted by the term *farang*, which literally means “foreign” or “foreigner”, but which refers specifically to white foreigners. As Wilson observes, the whiteness evoked by *farang* draws from the economic and social influence of the global north, and is associated with ideas about progress and modernity (Wilson, 2004, p. 16).

Cosmetic surgeries and racialisation have been long debated within the United States, often in the context of Asian-American consumption of cosmetic surgeries and skin whitening products (Kaw, 1993, pp. 74–89; Davis, 2003, pp. 87–105; Spickard and Rondilla, 2007, pp. 79–104). In an Asian-American context, these

arguments have revolved around double eyelid surgeries, nose surgeries and whitening creams. Kaw argues that eyelid surgery, in particular, reveals the desire of Asian-Americans to appear more “white” as a form of racialised, embodied alienation (1993, p. 77). Many counter-narratives exist to neutralise the claim that eyelid surgery is a form of bodily or social alienation, however. Surgeons themselves argue that eyelid surgery for Asian patients is not about “Western influence” but rather the desire to appear more “alert and bright-eyed” (McCurdy, 2005, p. 8). Asian patients undergoing eyelid surgery may explain it as the desire to have a “more natural-looking double eyelid, to look more awake or to make eye make-up application easier” (Rondilla and Spickard, 2007, p. 109). The perceived necessity of undergoing surgery, however, may be “determined by what Asian should look like in the white imagination”: researchers cite cosmetic surgeons’ use of the phrase “ethnic correction” to make the point that standards of correctness are always adjudicated by the idea that an ideal exists for “each race”. In most Asian countries, they point out, celebrities and movie stars are “noticeably whiter and taller, with more angular features, than the general population” (Rondilla and Spickard, 2007, p. 3).

This applies particularly to Thailand, where *luk kreung* [Thai Eurasians] are very popular within fashion, music and celebrity culture (Beech, 2001, p. 1). Walter Persaud reads the popularity of whiteness in dominant Thai culture and advertising as evidence of a form of racist and sexist false consciousness, related to a fetishisation of European whiteness and culture. In modern Thailand, he writes, “selves and subjectivities bearing European racial and colonial modernity are being incited, produced and normalised through new global social technologies, while the contra-modern [or non-white] are violently displaced to the margins” (2005, p. 22). As I note above, skin colour is a potent signifier of beauty, and generally in Thai culture, pale skin is deemed to be more beautiful. As a 2006 *International Herald Tribune* article on whitening products in Thailand points out, some Thai-language insults associate darker skin with stigma or undesirability.

One common insult is “tua dam”, or black body, a rude term to degrade someone of lower social standing. Along the same lines are “e dam” (black girl) or “dam tap pet” (black like a duck’s liver) (Fuller, 2006, p. 1).

Where femininity is concerned, pale skin may be one of the range of attributes necessary for a Thai woman to be considered beautiful. “Complexion is the beauty asset most elaborated [within Thai society],” Penny van Esterik observes (2000, p. 154). This paleness may be inflected by notions of class and region, rather than simply a desire to be “white”, as in *farang*. As in other Asian countries such as Japan, in Thailand lighter skin pigment also represents membership of the élite, or the middle class. To quote van Esterik again: “light, bright skin [is] coveted by both rural and urban women, partly as proof that they were exempted from work in the sun” (2000, p. 154). In Thai advertisements commodifying and idealising lighter skin pigmentation, whiteness is a somatechnic: a bodily technology. However, it is also a form of cultural capital that can be acquired through the correct labours. This has not always been the case in Thailand, however. Van Esterik notes that beauty pageants held in the 1930s emphasised “natural beauty”, positing a continuity

between inner morality and outer appearance (1996, p. 215). During the 1980s in Thailand, beauty, particularly as it was idealised and adjudicated in pageants, became available as the product of surface self-transformation, in line with the standards of increasingly popular international beauty pageants. Under these conditions, van Esterik suggests,

beauty has effectively detached from its [previous] moral base. Beauty is interpreted less as a natural attribute existing within the body and radiating outward, and more as something that can be purchased, placed on the surface [of the body] and enhanced (2000, p. 154).

Yet another factor contributing to the popularity of facial cosmetic surgeries might be Chinese face-reading techniques that have cross-pollinated with Thai ideals of beauty through a history of centuries of migration back and forth between Siam and China, and the presence of a large Sino-Thai population in contemporary Thailand. Face reading, or Oriental physiognomy, is used in contemporary Chinese medicine (and New Age culture) as a technique to interpret individuals' destinies (Wakefield and Yarborough, 2006, p. 3). Face reading first emerged as a possible explanatory factor in understanding the popularity of cosmetic and aesthetic surgery in Thailand during an interview I conducted with Prempreeda Pramroj na Ayutthaya, a Bangkok-based researcher who wrote her Masters dissertation on *kathoe*y cabaret. Conscious that my Thai-language limitations might have meant that I missed out on some of the cultural contexts in which *kathoe*y desires for cosmetic surgery were located, I asked Prempreeda about the significance of cosmetic surgery in *kathoe*y culture. "[Aesthetic surgery] is linked to the ideology of Chinese face reading," she said.

We think that the nose is significant to shape your future. We can look at someone's face and look at their nose and guess about their happiness... For the girl, if you think this particular time of your life is not good, and you want to change your life, you can. For example [by using] aesthetic surgery. Rhinoplasty (Interview with Prempreeda Pramroj na Ayutthaya, 20 January 2008, Siam Center, Bangkok).

Perhaps it is impossible to predict in which contexts the idealised vision of pale-skinned, "angular featured" Thai femininity associated with *kathoe*y may circulate as a desire for specifically *Western* whiteness and where it may index aspirations or desires associated with class or modernity. As Prempreeda observed,

*Kathoe*y might think that when they wear the make-up, if their nose is not sharp enough, in order to wear the make-up it is not beautiful. But if they do the aesthetic surgery, for example the rhinoplasty, is easier to wear the make-up and look good (Interview with Prempreeda Pramroj na Ayutthaya, 20 January 2008, Siam Center, Bangkok).

Far too little scholarly research exists on face reading to be able to examine it in depth. It is clear from the analysis above, however, that claims that the desire for

aesthetic surgery and face lightening is evidence of a devaluing of Asian-ness or Thai-ness, and a desire for European whiteness must be brought into question. Contrary to these claims, I have argued that it is possible to see a number of conflicting desires for a class-based and racialised ideal in the desire for cosmetic surgeries. A more complex analysis again might pursue the commodification of technologies of bodily transformation as forms of conspicuous consumption.

### **The Somatechnics of Capital**

Their sheer cost reminds us that skin whitening creams and cosmetic surgeries are luxuries, the mere consumption of which may enhance the consumer's magical aura of being affluent enough to afford them. According to a study of young people in Chiang Mai, consumers associated whitening creams and cosmetic surgery with the condition of being "modern" (Warunee, 2002, pp. 152–53). If the ability to transform one's body equates with access to the economic resources to be "modern"—which in this case means having the resources to be socially mobile—then perhaps it is all the more important to recall the older, more class-based signification of whiteness as that boundary between manual field labourers and those who stayed inside. Nonetheless, this distinctive Thai assemblage of multiple significations of whiteness installs a hierarchised economy of beauty (and specifically feminine beauty), whether it circulates around racialisation or not. In either case, its effects may be just as problematic.

The importance of modernity as a desirable commodity cannot be underestimated here. Skin whitening creams, rhinoplasty, eyelid surgery and so on are forms of somatechnical capital, valuable not only for the physical transformation or beautification they promise but for the very practice of being seen to consume something. The commodity being consumed here is not only a technique of embodied transformation but the state of being modern itself. Modernity has multiple significations in different sites: as being "Western", middle class, socially and geographically mobile, and as involving consumption. In a recent paper on cosmetic surgery in Colombia, Michael Taussig suggested that, within contemporary global capitalism, the female body is the "glowing centre of consumption".<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is precisely because femininity is so emblematic of the consuming subjectivity of modernity that the desire for femininity, and the desire for whiteness in whatever ways it signifies, meet in *kathoeys* desires to be, or be *like*, the "modern woman", who is always already the consumer *par excellence*.<sup>21</sup>

If Thailand, as Persaud argues, presents a context in which this economy of desire for a particularly gendered "whiteness" is symptomatic of a complex of power/knowledge that governs the formation of Thai subjectivity generally (Persaud, 2005, p. 212), how does this relate to the connection between transgender embodiment practices and cosmetic surgery? Wong argues that this issue is inevitably bound up in the politics of Thai nationalism and desires for Thai differentiation or branding internationally.

Although there is a desire to retain agency in creating an authentic Thai identity and beauty, the demands created by tourist consumption . . . mean a flux between adopting a Western outlook and maintaining "local exotica".

Thailand had to be modern and at the same time, “exotic” ... romanticized *kathoey* culture was part of this “exotica” (Wong, 2006, p. 12).

This mediation will be a site of particular tension if this romanticised *kathoey* culture is composed of *kathoey* who do not, in fact, aspire to be romanticised exotica, but instead seek the social mobility signified by obtaining cosmetic surgery. If the Thai cosmetic surgery industry works by maintaining this desire, perhaps the means by which the desire is called into being, and the particular form of “whiteness” at work, may be less important. A calculus of idealised aspiration for beauty premised on the desire for modernity and social mobility, however, does not function in gender reassignment clinics that cater overwhelmingly to non-Thais. As I note above, Thailand is often narrated by non-Thai trans women as an (exotic) culture of beauty, grace and femininity. Surgeons, too, may be engaged in a self-Orientalising racial ideology that regards Thais as “more feminine”. One surgeon told me that Thai *sao praphet sorng* or *kathoey* hardly ever require facial feminisation surgery, as an Asian facial structure is apparently already more feminine than that of Europeans. Given that Westerners’ interface with *kathoey* culture is often through cabaret or beauty contests, as a cultural product to consume as part of a temporary tourism experience, the fact that the category of “Thai femininity” is already contested within Thai society may be lost on these non-Thai subjects.

This only points to the other startling inequities already present in neoliberal economies of globalisation. Racialised positioning is often the dividing line that separates those who can afford to be “modern” from those who cannot. This seems like a truism, until we comprehend how minutely those dividing lines differentiate even within the same markets, and how they always involve mediating and modulating desires and fantasies, the very stuff of our selves. Tracing the micropolitics of those differentiations and how they come to bear on individual subjects is perhaps one way to understand and target the inequalities.

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### Notes

1. *Kathoey* refers to male-to-female transgender or transsexual categories (Jackson, 2003c, para 2), but historically it has many different connotations, including male homosexuality, a third sex or gender [*phet-thi-sam*], and cross-dressers who are assigned male or female at birth (Jackson, 1997, p. 171; Jackson, 2003). The widely used term *Ladyboy* is a Thai coinage of English words to signify *kathoey*. *Sao praphet sorng*, which I use later in this essay, is a Thai term meaning “second type of woman”. It is used by many gender variant Thais to identify themselves in preference to speaking of *kathoey*. *Kathoey* connotes multiply in Thai as psychiatrically

pathologising, as derogatory popular slang, and sometimes as an ironic reappropriation of pathologising or derogatory meanings.

2. An anonymous reviewer furnished me with this neat summary of the broad project that this essay attempts, for which I am very appreciative.
3. Following the conventions of transgender studies, in this essay I use the term “trans woman” or “trans women” to refer to individuals known in mainstream or archaic contexts as male-to-female or MTF transsexuals.
4. Marx’s idea of the commodity fetish theorises that, within the dynamic of exchange we call capitalism, objects acquire a meaning that alienates the consumer of an object from its producer. Further, the object confers its consumer or owner psychically with particular forms of power – for example, prestige, popularity, charm, and so on. See Marx (1976, pp. 164–65).
5. Somatechnics is also the name of a research centre affiliated with Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. See <http://www.somatechnics.mq.edu.au/about/>, accessed 31 January 2009.
6. “Somatechnical capital” thus extends Bourdieu’s notion of cultural, social and symbolic capital rather than referring to capital in the narrow Marxian sense.
7. This concept emerged as part of a discussion about embodiment, globalisation and commodification at the ‘Globalised Bodies, Embodied Globalisation in the Asia Pacific Region’ workshop at the University of Melbourne in August 2008. I am grateful to Audrey Yue and Mark McLelland for mentioning forms of capital and somatechnics in the same space, allowing me to make this connection, and for the productive discussion that followed.
8. In this essay I use GRS (gender reassignment surgery) rather than SRS (sex reassignment surgery) or sex affirmation surgery, in keeping with a critical perspective that gender is performative and makes legible the somatic “realness” of sex. See Butler (1993, p. 2).
9. Trans theory is a growing discipline within studies of sexuality and gender that takes as its object gender variant, transgender and transsexual practices, politics, identities and culture. See More (1999, p. 240) and Stryker (2006, pp. 1–18).
10. For a discussion of the theoretical field comparing various trans and cosmetic surgical practices and a critique of Davis’s point here, see Sullivan (2006, pp. 553–56).
11. See [www.sexchangecenter.com](http://www.sexchangecenter.com), accessed 12 January 2008. The acronym MTF (or MtF) is used in some contexts as an abbreviation of “Male to Female”. As I note above, “trans woman” or “trans women” is my preferred usage in this article.
12. For a more detailed analysis of the Thai gender reassignment medical travel market than I can do justice to here, see Aizura (2009a).
13. On medical tourism in Thailand, see Whittaker (2008) and Connell (2006).
14. My comments here draw on fieldwork undertaken for my PhD thesis on transsexuality and travel. See Aizura (2009a).
15. The name Melanie is a pseudonym.
16. Elsewhere I make a more complex reading of Melanie’s tattoo as a form of personal ritual. See Aizura (2009b).
17. While Miss Alcazar and Miss Purple Crown are two examples of *kathoey* beauty pageants whose winners generally pass as very feminine, graceful and delicate women, other large *kathoey* beauty pageants actively resist this norm of “feminine realness”. The annual Miss ACDC pageant, for example, judges contestants on their wit and “being themselves”, and was described to me as more a “gay queen” competition. Often the final decision of the judges has been to crown larger, darker-skinned contestants with the Miss ACDC crown.
18. *Sao praphet sorng* literally means “second type of woman” in Thai and is used by many gender variant people in Thailand who disidentify with the medicalising or derogatory significations of *kathoey*.
19. “Under erasure” is a Derridean term to denote using a word when it does not quite fit, but acknowledging the impossibility of finding the “correct” word or pinning down meaning absolutely. In *Of Grammatology*, for a term to be under erasure means that it appears with a strike-through or crossed out to signify its ineligibility; even so, the word appears and makes meaning(s). See Derrida (1976, p. xv).
20. Michael Taussig, ‘Beauty and the Beast’, paper delivered at the Contemporary Societies and Cultures Seminar Series in Anthropology, Gender Studies and Social Theory, 16 July 2008, University of Melbourne, Australia.

21. I am grateful to Fran Martin for suggesting I make this particular connection between gender, modernity and consumption. For readings on gender and consumption, see the discussion of consumerism and femininity in the twentieth century in Felski (1995, pp. 61–90) and the volume on gender and consumption edited by Casey and Martens (2007).

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