

*Dormitories and Other Queer Spaces:
An Anthropology of Space, Gender,
and the Visibility
of Female Homoeroticism
in Thailand*

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IN THAILAND, MANY WOMEN SPEND PART OF THEIR LIVES in dormitories in order to live near their workplace or school. Dormitories were established as a response to the growth of urban and industrial jobs as well as the growth of schooling for girls and women in provincial and urban centers, and they can be found in factories, schools, and shopping malls. As a sex-segregated space, the dormitory has provided a homosocial environment that allows women to conform to hegemonic gender norms; these norms require them to be heterosexually chaste and circumscribe their movements in settings that are coded as "public." Yet the dormitory is also a location in which female homoeroticism is produced through the intersections of social, economic, and political interactions. The dormitory is, using Ara Wilson's phrase, a "generic" space—a space that is not specifically read as "queer" nor understood in its cultural context as a site of contestation or resistance to normative orders.¹ Queer, as figured through queer theory, implies an oppositional stance to normative orders of gender and sexuality and identifies moments in which heteronormative assumptions regarding supposedly natural linkages between gender, the sexed body, and sexuality are destabilized. Ironically, as

this article will argue, these moments may be thoroughly contained within gender normative structures such that homoeroticism and gender transgressions are produced in sites that are culturally sanctioned for female and male homosociality. Generic spaces, rather than those that are explicitly situated as queer such as a gay bar, are key spaces in which queer modalities may thrive. Rather than positing a binary between queer and non-queer space, the concept of and focus on generic space can help us identify ways in which queer moments depend upon the usage of everyday gendered spatial norms.

My analysis of generic spaces challenges a remarkably persistent refrain found in studies on same-sex sexuality and transgenderism: that across cultures, female forms of same-sex sexuality and transgenderism are rarely visible due to women's lack of access to public space. This article complements those texts that have noted and resisted the marginalization of women within this literature.² More specifically, it builds on this previous work by exploring the relationship between the presumed rarity of female same-sex sexuality cross-culturally and cultural conceptions of space. In particular, it examines the functioning of an uncritical application of a masculinist, Western-centric division of space into opposing spheres of public/private (or public/domestic) in which "public" is linked to visibility and sexual emancipation, a critique that is a long-existing project within feminist and anthropological studies.³ Spaces that are not considered public, such as home spaces, may in fact be sites of same-sex eroticism, particularly although not exclusively for women. One such location, the all-female dormitory within Thailand, is an extension of culturally encoded home spaces—a kind of generic space—yet is produced through social relationships that are themselves embedded in global processes.

Doreen Massey provides a useful framework for the exploration of space as a product of social relationships—political, economic, and social.⁴ Such a position helps us untangle problematic assumptions that underlie a paradigm that has structured queer and LGBT analysis, specifically public/private dualisms, and linkages between queerness, visibility, and liberation. For Massey, the division of space into public and private realms, each characterized by a set of assumptions, is an ideologically driven "imagining." The public is imagined as the site of political activity, but also as the site of global activity. Massey insightfully critiques these assumptions in her study in which she

compares the work and home spaces of workers in a scientific laboratory.⁵ At first her study appeared to confirm the familiar narrative of an open work location as a porous space at the intersection of global forces, in contrast to the safe, regulated, and supposedly closed space of home. However, Massey argued that on further analysis it became clear that both spaces were sites of closure and regulation and were also sites of global intersections. For instance, in the work site only certain types of behaviors or practices were permissible, hence this limited range of activities of the work site made it appear more closed than originally imagined. Also, the home spaces were more open than originally imagined in that they allowed a greater range of entry of various types of people and activities than the work space, thereby challenging the easy dualisms of global/local and open/closed that appeared to map onto the dualism work/home.

Massey's insight is worth pondering in that it highlights the problematic linkages between public spaces, global forces, and, as I will suggest, the range of possible sexual encounters and relationships that these spaces engender. If emerging sexual cultures are understood as products of economic, political, and cultural global forces, which they surely are in part, then the question of which spaces are produced through these global relationships becomes particularly relevant. Furthermore, Massey's perspective challenges the idea that there is such a thing as "private" or "domestic" space that is closed off from global/social/economic forces, and participation in spaces coded as public, identified through a register of visibility, is a necessary precondition of queer sexuality. Specifically, Massey's troubling of the essentialized spatial categories of public and private further trouble the presumed linkages between kinds of spaces and their potential for sexual emancipation from heteronormative orders. Thus, she does not deny the existence or the social importance of the division of space into this dualism; indeed this division is a socially significant mode of defining space and regulating access to it once defined. However, if spaces coded as private and public are both situated within social and economic forces that create their possibility, then there can be no privileged site that marks itself as more fully liberated from social restrictions (thereby allowing queerness to emerge), a point that will particularly resonate in the discussion of queer studies literature below.

In this article I argue that dormitory spaces are critically important for the widespread production of same-sex relationships and larger social networks, as well as the central identities that frame these relationships. These sites are products of the spread of global capital and the creation of production zones that have led to domiciles created to house people engaged in a range of activities linked to urban life and industrial work. Workers, students, and traders, for example, are typical populations living in dormitories that exist in urban areas and near production zones. These locations, moreover, are embedded within local sexual and gender norms and discourses that are in themselves produced in conjunction with transnational interactions. Factory floors, schools, markets, and dormitories are all important sites for the production of female homoeroticism in Thailand—yet they do not typically visually register as gay, queer, or LGBT spaces.

This article is divided into two parts: the first section explores the controlling narratives of same-sex sexuality and space as well as the anthropological, feminist, and queer theory responses to these narratives. The paradigm of public and private spaces that are central to LGBT activism and scholarly focus will be foregrounded for the ways such paradigms marginalize female same-sex sexuality. The second section of the article is an ethnographic illustration of the connections between space, gender, and the construction of sexual narratives, experiences, and identities in Thailand. Specifically, this section posits the importance of generic sites, such as the dormitory, for the emergence of female same-sex sexual culture in Thailand.

QUEERING PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND DOMESTIC SPACE

This work aims to join that of scholars whose research demonstrates how the dominant narrative of the *masculine public* seems to marginalize women's activities and spatial practices that do not conform to the masculine public, while simultaneously marginalizing male sexual culture that fails to conform to the expectation of the public male. In particular, rural men engaged in same-sex sexuality are likewise erased from the dominant model of the migrating, urban, public space-seeking, liberated, "out" gay male.⁶ The lack of women, or men, performing queerness in visibly recognizable ways in spaces hegemomically coded as public has been the justification within a range of

literature on same-sex sexuality for the claim that lesbians in particular cultural or historical settings are rare or nonexistent. For example, in the following passage, Dennis Altman briefly mentions the apparent lack of lesbians within the emerging LGBT cultures globally.

Indeed the gay world—less obviously the lesbian, largely due to marked differences in women's social and economic status—is a key example of emerging global “subcultures.”⁷

The proposition of a “global gay” is itself highly problematic and has been the subject of critique.⁸ For the discussion here, it is precisely this “less obvious” quality of lesbians that compels further analysis. To whom and why are these lesbian worlds less obvious? Or, what are the relationships between space, visibility, and the presence of erotic possibilities that make these lesbians so hard to discern?

Public spaces are so central to the Western/transnational imagining of same-sex sexuality (such as bars, clubs, gay neighborhoods, parks, and public restrooms) that they have become markers of same-sex sexuality itself. This association between public space and same-sex sexuality has been frequently appropriated in queer LGBT studies in such a way that the visible presence of same-sex sexuality is understood as an index of liberation made possible through access to public space. For example, in the introductory chapter to their influential work, *Queers in Space*, Gorden Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter conclude that the sexualized spaces that are the basis of their study seem to be male-occupied spaces. Moreover, they claim, “historically rooted misogyny has blocked the development of female eroticized space.”⁹ In response, the authors encourage women to engage in the creation of eroticized public space. They assert,

Gay men have been writing about outdoor spaces of cruising and contact for half a century, suggesting activist agendas to enhance security, contact, and pleasure; now it is time for women to more fully deconstruct the phallogentric and gendered generalizations about public sex. New visions, strategies, and tactics are sorely needed in order to liberate spaces for women's erotic satisfaction.¹⁰

While they astutely identify that misogyny, or gendered politics more generally, have limited women's access to these public spaces, they neglect to recognize there is an apparent presumption operating

within their text in which these public spaces are coded as the necessary components of same-sex sexual subjectivity and liberation as if they were gender-neutral spaces.

This linkage between public space and sexual liberation is an extension of the Western LGBT politics in which visibility (made possible by access to public domains) is a marker of political agency and, by extension, a form of political and social emancipation. The public/private dualism that implicitly structures much of LGBT literature, discourse, activism, and scholarship figures spaces marked as private as extensions of oppressive heterosexist domesticity and thus implies that such spaces are unlikely to be productive sites of homoeroticism. For example, Judith Halberstam has applied queer theory to notions of space and time, but, in this usage, queer, almost by definition, excludes some sites of possibility. She writes, "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."¹¹ Here the delinking of queer from family and domesticity in general seems arbitrary and already based on a masculinist Western association of queer with public and non-family-centered spaces. In this model, a slippage occurs in which the embedded dualism of liberating/public versus oppressive/domestic is already gender coded. If men are allocated spaces understood as public for work and recreation, which they frequently are in many cultural contexts, women are relegated, by definition, to non-queer exile. If queer, by definition, destabilizes normativity, then the normativity of masculine publics must also be a site for deconstruction.

The dualism of public/private (or domestic) that Massey has problematized in the discussion above is a central controlling element in the imagination of sexual spaces and thus must be a first site of deconstruction. Queer and feminist scholarship has produced extensive literature in which the dualism of public/private is historicized and deconstructed.¹² For example, Nancy Duncan explores the ways in which the naturalized division of space into opposing realms was strengthened with the rise of the European nation-state as a way to limit state power and, as a result, further linked women with the depoliticized private realm. This division—already unstable and contested—is always the site of "territorializing and deterritorializing processes."¹³

Susan Gal develops this notion that the dualism of public/private is ideological, fractal, and indexical. She argues that neither public nor private have absolute referents; there are no wholly "public" or "private" spaces. She claims instead that "public and private do not simply describe the social world in any direct way; they are rather tools for arguments about and in the world."¹⁴ The terms operate indexically (they are context-dependent) within communication to make distinctions that are fractal—endlessly divisible into new dualisms of public and private. In other words, there is no actual space that is private or public outside of communication events in which a space is positioned as conforming to this dualism. Gal explains that, for example, a street may be understood to be public, but within this public space a front stoop may be deemed private and the sidewalk in front of it, public. The fractal nature of spaces has been amply explored by examining the anthropology of how we live within the home, ostensibly a private or domestic space, but one that contains areas or rooms that are public in contrast to inner spaces—typically women's spaces—that are private.¹⁵ According to Gal, when used in communication, the division of public and private (or domestic) appears natural and stable, and the contextual and fractal nature of the dualism are elided.

Given that public or private spaces are not things in themselves, but a set of assertions made about practices in particular locations, the easy associations made between public and emancipating possibility become more problematic. The concept of public has operated within texts on LGBT lives, cultures, and social networks as signifying a site of liberation and sexual emancipation. This meaning of public is bolstered by the influential work of Jürgen Habermas in which the presence of a "public sphere" is the marker of an emancipated, civil society.¹⁶ Although for Habermas, the public sphere is an abstraction referring to a reading public, not necessarily a physical space.

This deconstruction of the apparent stability and referential quality of the public/private dualism is also explored within studies of male same-sex sexuality. In an impressive ethnographic study of sexual encounters at a highway rest area, John Hollister illustrates the relational and contextual nature of the concept of "public sex" that has been iconically linked to contemporary US gay male culture. Hollister challenged the concept of rest area sex as being public by

demonstrating that the concept of public is ideologically defined as nonsexual (in other words, sex is private) and that the rest area bathroom stalls and bushes are arguably more private than many bedrooms.¹⁷ Hollister identified the inherent contradictions in the term "public," particularly as it is deployed in association with this historically and culturally specific form of male same-sex sexual culture. The "public sex" that occurred in his research site, the rest area, was hidden from outsiders, within restrooms. The public bathroom is by its nature a place designed to provide levels or degrees of privacy from the general public. Yet this type of men's public restroom has zones that are relatively private or public: the urinals are more public spaces where the male body is more visible than in the bathroom stalls, for example.¹⁸

So, while it should be clear that "public space" is a floating signifier with no stable referent, it is ideologically linked to the central marker of liberated sexuality in a western/Anglo discourse; that of "coming out," or a publically declared and thus visible sexuality. The argument of this article is that this tripartite linkage — public/visible/emancipated — is already gendered and forecloses other forms of sexuality, particularly women's same-sex sexuality, that do not conform.

As a challenge to the dominant trope of "coming out," Gayatri Gopinath locates the female homoeroticism evident in a range of texts that escape this dominant queer model. She analyzes a range of South Asian texts and films, including Bollywood films, an Urdu short story ("The Quilt" by Ismat Chughtai), and *Fire*, a film directed by Deepa Mehta that is loosely based on Chughtai, the author of "The Quilt." Based on representations of female same-sex sexuality in all of these films and texts, Gopinath argues "female homoeroticism suffuses home space rather than existing in exilic relation to it."¹⁹ For example, "The Quilt" revolves around a sexual relationship between the Begum (lady of the house) and a servant, told through the eyes of a young female relative of the Begum. *Fire* also portrays an erotic relationship between two female members of a household, although the homoeroticism here is rendered explicit (public) and therefore is subject to the homophobic repression.

Through these examples, Gopinath argues that the efforts of South Asian and South Asian diasporic films to make the queer subject explicit and visible make the queer typically male, and when the

subject is female (as in "The Quilt" and *Fire*), the image becomes the object of sexist, homophobic, and nationalist projects (where the subject is also expelled from the home space). She thus concludes that the price to pay for visibility is often eradication of all references to female homoeroticism as the explicit queer is made male within contemporary South Asian film. As a result, it is within the ostensibly heteronormative spaces that female homoeroticism has been produced, unlabeled, and exiled from explicit or sexual discourse. Gopinath states, in contrast with the concept of queer as exterior to heteronormative domesticity, "I would argue that, at least in the middle-class urban Indian context . . . it is precisely within the cracks and fissures of rigidly heteronormative arrangements that queer female desire can emerge."²⁰ This conclusion is certainly applicable to the Thai context, discussed in detail below.

Both Gopinath's and Hollister's work demonstrate that the same-sex sexual practices and representations they explore (both female and male) were consistent with hegemonically constructed gendered domains. The dominant narrative of a visible same-sex sexuality that depends on a public/private binary obscures historically and socially contingent spatial practices, gender norms, and same-sex practices. It is the argument of this article that it is precisely these gendered domains that are structured by social relationships that in turn provide possibilities of various forms of intimacy and eroticism.

SITES OF FEMALE SAME-SEX SEXUALITY IN THAILAND

The dominant way in which female same-sex sexuality is currently understood and practiced in Thailand is through *tom* and *dee* gender categories. Toms are masculine-identified women who are both understood to be sexually attracted to non-tom women and perceived as a kind of fixed, natural category. Tom, a derivative of the English word "tomboy," is an extension of *kathoe*y—an intermediate or third gender—a concept that has historical depth in Thailand.²¹ Kathoey is a term used to refer primarily to male-bodied individuals who have a feminine appearance and/or identify as a type of woman (often referred to as a *phuying prapheet song*, meaning second kind of woman). Historically, the term was also used to refer to females who held a masculine identity, but now that subject-category has been replaced by tom. Dees, a term derived from the English word

“lady,” on the other hand, are not markedly different from “ordinary” women (*phu-ying thammada*) in the sense that any woman is a potential dee. If one is a tom and wants to find a girlfriend, one need not go somewhere where dees congregate—all women can be dee. In fact, the most common term to refer to the partner of a tom is simply “woman.” All women are perceived as potential partners for a tom in that a woman normatively selects masculine partners, even if the masculine tom is framed in normative discourse as not ideal partners because they are not male. Rather than a strict division between heterosexual and lesbian women, tom and dee are configured as a pairing of transgendered masculine toms and their feminine partners, who often are not distinguished, by themselves or others, from women in general. However, tom and dee are not the only terms available to girls and women who are engaging in same-sex sexuality. For example, the term *ying-rak-ying* (woman-loving woman) is a recently introduced term that is popular among academics and activist-oriented women who wish to avoid the gender-classification of tom and dee. Still, tom and dee are by far the most widely used categories of self-description and have a much larger social usage.

The linkages often made between queerness, visibility, and liberation, evident in the literature discussed above, are particularly problematic in the Thai context. One clear example of this is the lack of resonance with the concept of “coming out,” that is, publically proclaiming a sexual orientation/identity. Most of the toms and dees I interviewed had never made such a proclamation although their relationships were often known of and acknowledged by friends and family members. Toms explained that their obvious masculine presentation made any such explicit proclamation unnecessary and overly confrontational. Dees, in contrast, often did not perceive themselves as having a particular identity that needed announcing—they were dees by virtue of a relationship that they were engaged in, not because of an inner sexual orientation or essence.²²

Toms and dees have a presence in the social landscape without being rendered explicitly into a kind of visibility that can be easily read as liberated within the dominant paradigm. Thailand has an active, dynamic, and longstanding tradition of female same-sex eroticism and transgenderism.²³ Flirtations and romances among teenage girls and college students, as well as same-sex encounters, flirtations,

and relationships over the course of one's life, are commonplace. Yet, women engaged in same-sex sexuality in Thailand do not conform to the social patterns that structure male homosexuality and homosociality in the Thai context. One example is that in interviews with Thai women who have been or were in same-sex relationships at the time of the interview typically did not frame sexuality as a motivation for the relationship or as a key aspect of the relationship, citing instead the friendship, companionship, and caring nature of these relationships. In fact, these relationships were sexual, as became clear through interviews and casual conversations, yet presenting them as sexual violated cultural norms for proper female behavior, which is in contrast to gay male relationships in Thailand that are more explicitly framed as sexual.

The relationship between same-sex sexuality and gender norms is evident in gendered spatial patterns as well. Anthropologists have demonstrated that men have traditionally had more access to travel and mobility than women in Thailand.²⁴ Traveling outside of the village is an important component of masculine maturation. Due to the matrifocal exogamous marriage patterns found throughout much of rural Thailand, men have traditionally needed to travel beyond village environs in order to find a suitable marriage partner whose family these men will marry into.²⁵ Males in Thai society also may have frequent experiences of traveling when they ordain as Buddhist monks, which many do for short periods of their lives. They also may experience traveling beyond their local villages or provinces through military conscription or labor migration.

Going to bars, clubs, and other venues of nighttime entertainment are also activities that are understood as appropriate and typical for men in the Thai context. Some toms also access these sorts of spaces as expressions of their masculinity.²⁶ For example, tom friends brought me to some local restaurants, owned by tom-dee friends, where their tom friends would congregate on a regular basis to catch up, commiserate, and enjoy drinking, smoking, and eating. These spaces were based on local networks of toms and sometimes their dee girlfriends.

In place of established lesbian bars or clubs, personal networks were the most important factor in establishing tom-dee recreational sites. Lesla, a tom-dee internet club, has been holding large monthly

parties in Bangkok for the past six years. The club rents out a disco or restaurant and advertises the event to their members who usually come in groups. This use of commercial space is an emerging form of hybrid public space that exists in a commercial nighttime setting, yet where attendance is based on membership in the club (or through friendship with a member of the club). For example, at parties I attended in 2005, the few women who came on their own were quickly identified by the organizers and introduced to groups of friends so that they could begin to form comfortable ties with other groups of women.

The more typical and longstanding tom and dee social networks, on the other hand, are commonly formed around female homosocial spaces or spaces that are understood to be safe and appropriate zones for women, particularly young and unmarried women. The dormitory is one such site, yet must be understood as part of a constellation of sites that collectively have fostered the development of tom-dee relationships and identities. Rather than explicitly queer or gay sites, with the concomitant measures of visibility that entails, these spaces are sites of female homosociality in which same-sex sexuality exists without conforming to the models of queer visibility outlined above. To provide a larger context for dormitory relationships, I will turn to the historical emergence of shopping malls, factories, and other sites that similarly provide locations for tom-dee relationships and identities.

In recent decades, the rates of female migration for the purposes of employment have risen dramatically.²⁷ Increasing employment opportunities in transnationally driven sectors such as factories, clerical offices and the tourist industry have led women to migrate away from the village and home for periods of time ranging from brief stints as adolescents or young adults to permanent resettlement in urban areas. Female homosocial spaces related to labor have thus developed in factories and offices that employ mostly female workers. This labor migration pattern has also been accompanied by an increase in types of spaces that function as safe and appropriate domiciles for women or girls living away from home.

In effect, the massive industrialization that has occurred in Thailand since the 1960s has been made possible by the availability of women workers, which was itself facilitated by the production of safe female

homosocial spaces in which these women could work and live. In turn, these homosocial spaces have been instrumental in the production of new same-sex sexual cultures and identities. Other more traditional spaces for women in Thailand, such as the market, have been transformed within the emerging globalized capitalist system in such a way as to provide spaces uniquely conducive to female same-sex sexual culture and female masculinity.

Ara Wilson has argued that shopping malls, particularly the ones composed of small, individually owned clothing stores (such as Mah Boonkrong in downtown Bangkok) have provided a space for toms to work free of the feminine dress requirements of corporate and governmental work, such as the typical requirement to wear skirts and makeup. Wilson suggests that the shopping mall provides a space for the development of tom identity, where the tom can "learn, or polish, the accoutrements of *tom* identity and conduct relationships." She asserts that these sites are productive of these identities, not just a space for toms "to be their (preexisting) selves."²⁸ The shopping mall, as a site for the display of consumer products and class status and a site for entrepreneurial toms has become an important site for toms and dees. Yet this space, like many sites of female homosociality, do not easily register as visibly queer.

The market is also an example of what Wilson terms a generic space—one that has been instrumental for the formation of tom-dee relationships and identities. These spaces are unlike the specialized recreational zones that cater to men in Thailand. Numerous commercial districts exist in Bangkok, as well as in towns and provincial centers, that are used as recreational spaces for males, such as snooker clubs, bars, and nightclubs, which also frequently serve as commercial sex establishments. Men involved in same-sex sexuality, many of whom have adopted the English term "gay" to distinguish themselves from the culturally recognized category of transgendered males, or *kathoeys*, have an impressive array of commercial spaces for socializing and making sexual contacts.

While men engaged in same-sex sexuality also access forms of generic space, such as public parks, for the purpose of making sexual contacts, these areas are not gender-neutral. While seeking sex in public spaces, such as parks, train stations, and restrooms, is typically understood as a natural part of male socialization and sexual life, it

is highly stigmatized for women. These spaces are widely known to be male cruising sites (for either heterosexual or homosexual sex) and exist alongside a formal recreational matrix catering to men from a wide range of economic and social statuses. Wilson describes these gendered differences in recreational space, stating, "the sexual landscape of the city reflects a gender system that constrains female mobility while entitling men and born-male kathoey to public eroticized spaces."²⁹

Toms and dees, on the other hand, use the spaces that women in general have access to and that are socially approved female sites, such as market areas, factories, and schools.³⁰ These generic sites have no explicit sexual connotation and are therefore consistent with Thai gender norms that restrict the open expression of female sexual desire. When toms and dees recreate, they typically use generic spaces; they meet friends at local restaurants or go to parties in each other's homes. In an interesting point of comparison, Wilson describes how female sex workers also follow this pattern of socializing in groups in locally known recreational zones, even if their work escorting clients around the city introduced them to other urban recreational zones. For the remainder of this article, I focus on one additional site that has been crucial in the formation of same-sex relationships and tom and dee identities: the dormitory.

DORMITORIES

From 1992 to 2010 I collected information on female same-sex relationships throughout Thailand, and a central site that emerged was that of the women's dormitory. Many of the toms and dees I interviewed lived in these spaces or had networks of friends who lived in dormitories. I conducted individual and group interviews with approximately twenty dormitory residents over this time period.

The dormitory is one of the sites most conducive to the formation of tom and dee social networks and love relationships. For women to live with other women is the norm for many Thais; women living alone are perceived as unusual, undesirable, unsafe, and even pathetic. Schoolmates, coworkers, and friends often share a small room in a dormitory, sleeping together for companionship at night. Thus, it becomes clear that heteronormativity is circumvented precisely through the use of normative gendered spaces that allow for

queer moments. Dormitories are found in provincial centers, as well as in industrial urban areas throughout Thailand. Factories and schools often provide dormitories for their workers and students, respectively. Clerical workers in urban areas also often stay in all-female dormitories.

Dormitories typically consist of a single bedroom with an attached bathroom or a shared bathroom for the residents on a particular floor. They are usually sparsely furnished with a bed or futon, a desk, and a closet. Women who share a room will often share a bed, although this practice does not have the same sexual connotation that it might in a Western context. Sharing a bed with another girl or woman in long-term sleeping arrangements is an experience that most of the women I interviewed have had, either while they were growing up in their family homes or when they moved into dormitories or apartments. Spending extended periods of time with relatives and friends' families where women often sleep in the same bed is a typical experience for many of the women interviewed. For example, one woman, identifying as a *dee*, told of sharing a bed with her *tom* lover and her lover's mother while in high school. Another woman, identifying as *ying-rak-ying* (woman-loving woman) told a story of sharing a bed with her lover and her lover's roommates in a dormitory while in college. Thus when *toms* and *dees* share a room and a bed in a dormitory room, it is consistent with normative living patterns for women in general. The dormitory, however, expands the possibility of forming longer-term relationships and, importantly, makes available a community of women who are also engaged in these erotic encounters.

Some private dormitories have become known as *tom-dee* dormitories and attract women seeking an atmosphere conducive to living with their female lover. I learned of one such dormitory when I was seeking additional *toms* and *dees* to interview during my research. A friend, a *tom*, offered to take me to a dormitory on Sukhumvit Road, a main thoroughfare in downtown Bangkok. She worked in the area and had walked by the dormitory many times, noticing the *toms* and *dees* collecting at the coffee shops and food stalls that lined the street in front of the dorm. The dormitory itself was a nondescript, drab, concrete building, like many of the buildings in that part of Bangkok. We approached one of the tables at a coffee stand and sat down, striking up a conversation with five or six *toms* and *dees*. My friend started

out with the rather direct "Are you all toms and dees?" They laughed awkwardly and said yes. The toms had close-cropped hair, button-down men's shirts and slacks, and the dees were dressed in halter-tops, jeans, and skirts in the popular style of young women in Bangkok.

One tom living in this dormitory, Dam, in her early thirties, ran one of the clothing stalls that line the edge of Sukhumvit Road for blocks. She made a modest living and had a room in the dormitory. She was talking to her friends about her recent breakup with a dee who had recently gotten engaged to a man. Dam, like many toms, said that she understood it was "normal" for women to want to marry (unlike toms who would not be seen as normal if they chose to marry a man and renounce their tom identity). Nevertheless, she felt overwhelmed with grief and her friends tried their best to comfort her. Jiap, another tom in the group, was well dressed, wearing designer label men's shirt and jeans. She did not have a job and lived with her girlfriend, Tii, in the dormitory. Tii worked as an escort at a high-class club and gave money to Jiap who liked to play cards, with some rather horrendous losses. Jiap seemed happy with her life, and when asked if she could choose to be a man or a woman, she answered that in her next life she did not want to be a "man or a woman, but a tom again," just one "richer and more handsome." The other toms and dees worked in clerical jobs, went to school, or worked in local shops. This dormitory had become, through word of mouth and networks of friendships, an informal social location for working-class toms and dees.

Other dormitories are established specifically for workers at a particular work site. For example, in the summer of 2005 I visited a dormitory for the nurses who worked at a large public hospital in Nakornpathom, a provincial capital just west of the urban sprawl of Bangkok. This dormitory was for women only and housed several hundred nurses. Each room housed between two and four people. The nurses explained that the dormitory was a way for them to live safely. There was no rent because the dormitory was a benefit of working at the hospital. One nurse, Ja, twenty-four years old and of Chinese descent, had been a nurse for four years and lived in the dormitory with roommates. She met a tom lover, also a nurse, at the hospital. She explained that the dormitory and work at the hospital worked out well for her. Her family was not comfortable with her earlier plans to travel to the

United States to look for work in the nursing field. Her family wanted her to live nearby and expressed concern over her safety. Her parents had met her tom lover, and Ja explained that they were more comfortable with her female lover than potential boyfriends.

The fear of improper heterosexuality, pregnancy, and violence from male lovers was a common reason that toms and dees gave for their parents' approval of their female lovers. The dormitory was part of this system of work that allowed women to seek job or school opportunities away from home but still be positioned as safe and free of improper sexual contacts. The largely female workspaces and domiciles became sites for female relationships and social networks to form.

Dormitories were experienced by some as pleasurable sites conducive to forming emotional and sexual relationships with other women and by others as sites of increased surveillance, while simultaneously they were seen as sites for intense emotional interaction with other women. The pleasure of dormitory life was expressed by Tao, a dee from Bangkok in her forties. Tao had lived in a women's dormitory with her tom lover when she attended college. They had met in high school and Tao explained that she had studied hard and had taken the college entrance test solely to be able to live with her lover in college. The dorm room served as a household for the two of them. According to Tao, the dormitory was also a place that provided women a chance to socialize and flirt. She explained,

There is flirting between women in the dorm. It is easy to flirt with each other in the dorm, and easy to have an affair because once you walk in the room there is nothing in the room, you just sit on the futon. You can have a drink with someone you like, and it is easy to lead to something else, because the bedroom is there, it is the guest room. If somebody spends the night with you, there is no other place to go. You have to share the room together, very intimately. It is easy to have a physical affair. I liked the dorm room. I felt like it is my place, my own life. Somehow I controlled everything in the room. People who came to my room could know me for how I am, how I decorate it and everything. They usually complimented me on my housecleaning. I don't think I'm an organized person, but every time people came to my room, I felt like I can show that I am

a good housewife, especially if a friend who is a tom came to visit. It is a way to flirt too. It is a way to attract the toms.

Tao spoke of the tom and dee social networks and couples beside herself who were in the dorm.

Many of my dorm mates were a couple, and everybody on every floor knew every couple. Maybe not knew them personally but knew that they are a couple, and know which floor they were on. I knew several couples in the floor under me, and the toms got together and knew each other. That gang was about four or five together at least. Every weekend they rotated among their rooms and had a party and drank and talked amongst themselves. The dees had their own group too. They knew each other and supported each other when they were heartbroken or broke up. They talked to each other and supported each other. It was too bad that on my floor we didn't have too many tom-dee couples, and I didn't dare go down to the other floor. I was envious of their group.

Other women were more ambivalent about the ability of the dormitory to allow spaces for romances to develop. Bee, a woman in her mid-thirties (identifying somewhat ambivalently as a *ying-rak-ying*) living with her female lover, described dormitory life at the Bangkok university she attended. At that time she did not have a female lover, but commented about the atmosphere of the dorm.

The setting was not conducive for tom-dee couples to sit and talk together one on one because many people were passing by all the time. Tom-dee couples didn't want to be the center of attention by the people walking by because they didn't want to be gossiped about or teased. Therefore, most tom-dee couples looked for a place outside the dorms, some place quiet, that there weren't many people passing by, to be able to sit and talk together, or read together. For example they would go to sit on the benches of a lecture hall in the evening, after class, or some corner of the library.

Bee then explained that on some level the dorms were conducive to tom-dee relationships because they provided a space away from the watchful gaze of their families. Bee also explained that they might have time together on weekends when most of the other students would go home.

The presence of female same-sex sexuality described above should not be understood as necessarily a result of a level of sexual liberation or resistance to social norms. Women engage in same-sex relationships in ways and in spaces that are largely consistent with normative expectations of women; they seek out partners in spaces coded as proper spaces for women, and they structure their sexual identities and sexual practices in terms of prescribed idioms of masculinity and femininity.³¹ Dormitories are one such space, made increasingly available through the process of urbanization and industrialization experienced over the past half century in Thailand. The dormitory is a generic place in that it is only as queer a space as the women who occupy it make it through the development of their social relationships. A dormitory becomes queer—it becomes a *tom-dee* dormitory—as women interact and form *tom-dee* relationships.

CONCLUSION

The literature on queer/LGBT lives is structured, ironically, by a normative paradigm in which queerness, visibility, and liberation are linked via access to spaces understood as public. This paradigm relies on the implicit functioning of the dualism of public/private. This article has sought to unhinge this dualism through the examination of female homoeroticism in Thailand, which can help us move beyond this normative paradigm to more fully understand queer moments in which heteronormativity is challenged. Specifically, the dormitories trouble the public/private divide in that they are simultaneously home/domestic spaces, sites that foster nonheteronormative sexualities and identities, and utterly embedded within transnational economic forces that have structured their necessity through the processes of urbanization and industrialization.

Spaces are by definition, according to Massey, formed through social relations. If we shift focus from these spaces as limiting (the home as limiting homoerotic experience and queerness in general) or liberating (the public sites) and turn instead to focus on the social relations that produce each site, we can see the dormitory as a site of female homoerotic pleasure. Places such as the family home, markets, or female homosocial sites such as schools, factory floors, and dormitories are potentially productive sites for the expression of female homoeroticism. Their very homosociality marks them as sexually

safe spaces. The dormitories are clearly homosocial sites, and the dormitory for women is coded as a barrier to inappropriate heterosexual relationships and acts. Dormitories perform a moral boundary that provides containment for and protection of female moral status. What is regulated for Thai women is their access to men and to spaces that are coded as sites of unregulated heterosexual sexuality.

It is precisely because they are protected places that they can function as sites of female homoeroticism. These sites are, above all, locations at the nexus of social interactions and sites of possibility. These dormitory spaces allow certain types of encounters in which sexuality and even identity are at play.

This article has attempted to perform an intervention into the persistent narrative in which the ability to engage in homoeroticism cross-culturally is portrayed as an ability to access public space that is implicitly or explicitly linked to normatively defined male spatial practice. When women involved in same-sex sexuality and transgenderism have not been found in these public sites, female homoeroticism is declared nonexistent. The narrative that female same-sex sexuality across cultures is rare or absent is a result of confusing the epistemological practices that have rendered female sexual forms unviewable or unreadable with their absence. Dismissals of female homoeroticism in any cultural context are highly suspect when the standards for visibility are not calibrated to recognize distinctive gendered spatial patterns and the cultural specificity of sexuality and sexual identity. I have argued that by exploring how social networks form spaces that are productive of homoeroticism, rather than looking at spaces in and of themselves as productive of homoeroticism, we can identify the possibility of female homoeroticism, as well as male homoeroticism, in a wide range of contexts.

While I have stressed the need to focus on spaces such as homes, work sites, markets, factories, schools, and dormitories, I am making no claims that these spaces are more liberating for women than any other kind of space. It may well be the case that social change and political agency depend on access to the means to engage in the formation of other domains and spaces. The spaces in which female homoeroticism occur may be thoroughly embedded in patriarchal or other oppressive value systems. Indeed, the dormitories, factories, and schools discussed above are sites of state, capitalist, institutional,

or family surveillance. However, the spaces introduced are produced through and within social networks that have given shape to the dominant model of female same-sex sexuality in Thailand. These relationships are enwrapped in complex hegemonies of gendered meaning and cannot be understood outside of social context. A reassessment of both the uncritical applications of public/private dualisms that promote linkages between public space and homoeroticism and attention to a spatial analysis of the gendering of sexuality are needed to uncover the presence and social significance of female forms of sexuality and gender cross-culturally.

NOTES

The descriptions provided in this paper of female same-sex sexuality in Thailand are based on dissertation fieldwork in Thailand for nine years dating from 1992 to 2001 and additional research from 2002–2003 and during the summers of 2005, 2009, and 2010. Follow-up interviews with several of my interviewees were conducted via email and telephone during the writing of this article in order to clarify points about dormitory living. I also reviewed recent Thai websites, newsletters, newspapers, and Thai theses on the subject of female same-sex sexuality and transgenderism for general updated information on the topic. My research was funded by the Fulbright Foundation, the Southeast Asian Studies Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Fund for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers at *Feminist Studies*, Kallayane Techapatikul, Andrew Reisinger, Nantiya Sukontapatipark, Chutima Pragatwutisarn, Evelyn Blackwood, the Department of Comparative Literature at Chulalongkorn University, the Institute for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State University, and the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgia State University.

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 30. See Nicholas Ford and Sirinan Kittisuksathit, *Youth Sexuality: The Sexual Awareness, Lifestyles and Related-Health Service Needs of Young, Single Factory Workers in Thailand* (Salaya, Nakornpathom, Thailand: Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, 1996), 35; and Thaweessit, "From Village to Factory 'Girl'."
 31. See Sinnott, *Toms and Dees*, for greater detail regarding tom and dee conformity to sexual norms.

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