

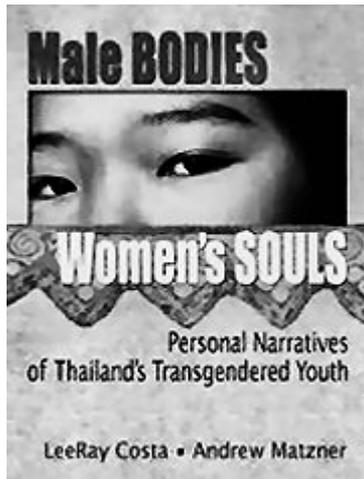
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Book Review: Male Bodies, Women's Souls

Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth

Reviewed by Dr. Tracie O'Keefe D.C.H.

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Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth, by LeeRay Costa & Andrew Matzner

Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth

by LeeRay Costa & Andrew Matzner
Published by The Haworth Press,
New York U.S.A. (2007)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0789031143

This book is for the seriously-minded sex and gender diversity student and a useful addition to an academic bookshelf.

This is an interesting book of some of Thailand's university students' experiences of being as *sao braphet song* or what is sometimes described by Westerners as *katoey*, or Thailand's Lady Boys. These first-person narratives are illuminating to Western ignorance of Thailand's gender constructs and how non-normative males with female type behaviours fit into Thai social, family and personal constructs.

The whole book is really structured like someone's postgraduate thesis and the stories themselves are not the main part of the book; instead its mass is taken up by the researchers' discourse around the stories. This, however, is forgivable since their ethnographic logic and exploration is handled with reasonable sensitivity and logic, even though it produces stories of university trans students whose middle-class views can at times obscure many of the realities that face sex and gender-variant males in Thai society.

Where the book makes research headway is that the stories show the linguistic differentiation between the identities of *katoey* (queer), *sao braphet song* (boy with female soul) and gay (men-identified-men who sleep with men). These interpretations become fluid according to region, subjective interpretation and the shifting emergence of Thailand's gay liberation awareness. It seems that effeminate males or males who have less than macho identities make a space for themselves in this society as non-gay female-souled boys who generally expect to fall in love with heterosexual-type men.

These comments, however, are insufficient to cover the ideologies and pragmatics that accompany the semantic disclosure in these stories. The researchers wisely acknowledge the limitations of objectifications of researchers seeking to distil typology from cultural disclosures that are very different from those we can understand through the English language.

I do take issue with the researchers' broad use of the word "transgender" to describe these experiences which at times are plainly no such thing.

Since Thailand is 95 percent Buddhist, there seem to be enormous pressures within the psyche of the storytellers not to disappoint their parents and to subjugate their own desires for female identities in order to conform.

Also there is the concept of karma to consider, with some of the storytellers saying that they may be *katoey* for the bad deeds they had committed in their last life. What is also surprising is the sheer number of *sao braphet song* and one is left with the deep suspicion that if being gay was more acceptable, many of these ladyboys might embrace more male-identified identities, although I am aware that this might be an arrogant Western comment to make.

This book is for the seriously-minded sex and gender diversity student and a useful addition to an academic bookshelf. Its observations are closer to the anthropological works of Margaret Mead than the psychiatric works of Freud or even the endocrinological studies of Louis Gooren. What it is, however, is another nail in the coffin of solely pathologising the medical model of transsexualism.

LeeRay Costa

From the Hollins Academics website:  LeeRay M. Costa, associate professor of anthropology and gender and women's studies; B.A. University of California, San Diego; M.A. New York University; Ph.D. University of Hawai'i-Manoa. Professor Costa's teaching and research interests include women, activism and social justice, food activism, local and global food systems, feminist theory, gender and sexuality, narrative methodology, and feminist pedagogy. She is currently engaged in a long-term collaborative research project with Dr. Kathryn Besio (University of Hawai'i, Hilo) that examines "Local" cuisine and

local food practices on the Big Island of Hawai'i. Her course, Food, Culture and Social Justice teaches Hollins students about civic engagement through their volunteer work at grassroots organizations in the Roanoke Valley. Dr. Costa has also conducted fieldwork in Thailand on women, development, NGOs, and transgendered youth.

Andrew Matzner

From Andrew Matzner's website:  Andrew Matzner has a Master's Degree in Anthropology and another in Social Work, and is a licensed Clinical Social-Worker, Psychotherapist and Life-Coach. He has also studied Emotional Freedom Techniques (E.F.T.) and Hypnosis, and has completed Reiki I and II training. He has a history of working with people dealing with serious mental-illnesses, starting as a case manager and then moving on to mental-health support services, treating clients in their homes and out in the community. Since being licensed as a psychotherapist in 2006, he has worked with a wide variety of clients in his private practice and specialises in pain management, emotional eating, and gender identity issues.



He is the author of a book about Hawai'i (*'O Au No Keia: Voices from Hawai'i's māhū and Transgender Communities*), and co-author of a book about northern Thailand (*Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth*, with LeeRay Costa). His newest book, *The Buddha Diet: A Guide to Creating a Positive Relationship with Food and Eating*, is also now available. He has also appeared several times as an expert commentator on *Taboo*, a television series on the National Geographic Channel in the U.S.A..

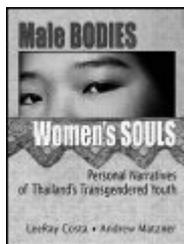
Andrew has been fortunate to spend extended amounts of time living in Japan, Thailand, Australia, and Hawai'i. Originally from New York, he currently lives in Roanoke, Virginia, U.S.A.. [More information about Andrew can be found on his website.](#) 



'O Au No Keia: Voices From Hawai'i's Māhū and Transgender Communities

Author: Andrew Matzner
Publisher: Xlibris (2001)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0738861616

From Amazon Books:  *'O Au No Keia* is a collection of spoken narratives by male-to-female transgendered people and māhū who live on the island of O'ahu. The powerfully moving stories in this book not only reveal the experiences of those who cross the boundaries of sex and gender, but also illuminate what it means to do so in the unique cultural context of Hawai'i.



Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth

Author: Andrew Matzner and LeeRay M. Costa
Publisher: Routledge (2007)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0789031143

From Amazon Books:  The Thai term *sao braphet song* (a "second type of woman") describes males who reject the gender of masculinity for femininity. *Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth* uses the narrative method, stories in the words of these "second type of women" to analyse these transgendered experiences. This previously ignored perspective of the Thai sex/gender system gained through this theoretical and methodological approach offers students and general readers a rich, more readily accessible foundation of knowledge about gendered subjectivity and sex/gender systems. The book features in-depth, autobiographical life histories from individual Thai transgendered youth. Life stories, told in the participants' own words, provides an engaging, at times touching, always insightful look at Thai culture's sex/gender system.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.