

# ***Phet*: Thai Drag Artists' Perspectives of Thai Sex, Gender, and Sexuality**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Phet* in Thailand is culturally, socially, and historically different from the Western notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Because of this, the understandings, construction, and expression of one's *phet* in Thailand should theoretically be different from the understandings, construction, and expression of one's gender and sexuality in the West. Yet, through engaging in the art of drag, it may be possible that understandings of *phet* may have been shifted since Thai drag is heavily influenced by the West. Therefore, in this paper, I tested whether Thai drag artists' understandings of *phet* would be different from Western drag artists' understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality through engaging in drag. Furthermore, I explored the understandings of an individual's *phet* through one's identity in and out of drag as well as through engaging in drag shows, both as a performer and as an audience, through conducting phenomenological research under the qualitative research method with the regular drag performers at the House of Heals bar, located in Bangkok, Thailand. Not only that, but I also explored the notion of drag as activism, drawing on current political events in Thai society, such as the ongoing #FreeYouth movement.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Drag:** In my understanding, drag in the present era (as of 2022) is a type of artistic performance and form of expression which involves an individual of any sex, gender, or sexuality who stylizes their own body in the name of self-expression and/or art, whether it may be through gendered or genderless adornment. Genderless, in this case, means *not in relation to gender*. Therefore, anyone can do drag and present an appearance through drag that does not conform to any heteronormative or non-normative gender. Instead, the appearance that one showcases through drag can be pure art out of one's own unique self-expression.

**Drag Queen:** In my understanding, a drag queen is an individual, regardless of sex, gender, or sexuality, who dresses up as a woman and uses this appearance as a form of art to perform or express their own selves, whether it may be in real life or online. The performances that a drag queen does is not limited to any particular skill, such as dancing, comedy, and lip syncing; rather, the performances that a drag queen does is done out of their own unique self-expression and artistry, which can take on any form. A drag queen can be and is usually also a political activist, using their voice to advocate for issues in which are important, personal, or both. These issues can be in relation to anything, including, but are not limited to: civil rights, gay rights, trans rights, human rights, and politics. A drag queen may also identify as a drag artist.

**Drag Artist:** In my understanding, a drag artist is an individual, regardless of sex, gender, or sexuality, who uses drag to express themselves, perform, and/or advocate for certain issues. Although the term 'drag artist' is not commonly used in the media as of 2022, I believe that this gender-neutral term that refers to individuals who do drag will serve as a way to broaden the art of drag, casting aside the limitation of drag being done by an individual of a certain sex, gender, or sexuality to look like or present themselves as a certain gender.

Form: When I use the word form, as in art form, I am referring to art that is done through the body and with the body as a form. Since drag is done through and with the body to express the self in any way possible, I believe that drag is an art form, and not just an art.

## Introduction

There is a lot of existing literature in the West on the notion of gender and the art of drag (see Kumbier, 2002; Taylor & Rupp, 2004; Taylor & Rupp, 2005; Greaf, 2015; Berbary & Johnson, 2016; Egner & Maloney, 2016; Brennan, 2017; Darnell & Tabatabai, 2017; Levitt et al., 2018; Knutson et al., 2019; Litwiller, 2020). However, there is still little to no research in English, to my knowledge, that explores the Thai notion of *phet* and the art of drag within localized Thai contexts. Because of this, I will be exploring how *phet* in Thailand is understood, constructed, and expressed by local Thai drag artists.

Thai understandings of *phet* are culturally, socially, and historically different from the Western notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Although Thai understandings of *phet* were, in part, affected by Western notions of gender – such as gender bifurcation (Jackson, 2013), which reinforced the Thai understanding of *phet* as a spectrum of masculinity and femininity (Jackson, 2012) – it did not adopt the separations of sex, gender, and sexuality into local understandings. Instead, Thai understandings of *phet* are “aspects of a single complex” (Cook & Jackson, 1999, p. 4), encompassing all Western notions of biological sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual intercourse within one singular notion: *phet*. As Cook and Jackson (1999) assert: “*Phet* is an exceptionally rich and productive notion in Thai, defying precise definition of translations as ‘sex,’ ‘gender,’ or ‘sexuality’” (p. 4). Because of this, the understandings, construction, and expression of one’s *phet* in Thailand should be, in theory, significantly and fundamentally different from the experiences of understanding, constructing, and expressing one’s gender and sexuality in the West. However, through engaging the Western notion of drag, Thai drag artists’ understandings of *phet* may have been shifted. Therefore, in this paper, I tested whether Thai drag artists’ understandings of *phet* would be different from Western drag artists’ understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality through the engagement of the art of drag. Not only that, but I also explored the understandings of an individual’s *phet* through one’s identity in and out of drag as well as through engaging in drag shows, both as a performer and as an audience through conducting phenomenological research with the regular drag performers at the House of Heals bar.

## Literature Review

### Defining Western Drag in the 21st Century

The term *drag* has been defined in a multitude of ways in the Western world, and its definitions seem to always be changing as more forms of drag become visible in the media, both traditional and online. With this, I would like to note that the academic findings pertaining to the art of drag have been made on phenomenological grounds and are based on more non-academic sources than other academic research subjects, since there is a “lack of literature” pertaining to drag discourse, specifically that of house/ball culture, as Rowan et al. (2013) notes (p. 181). Therefore, some of the information that is present in this article will also be utilized from media content, blog posts, and news articles as well as from personal perspectives and involvement, similarly to that of Rowan et al.’s work in 2013. However, there have been certain notable attempts at defining drag within the academic space, though at times problematic.

Within academia, drag has been conventionally defined as a type of performance that provides an opportunity for cisgender men to “express amplified femininity” as well as to “pursue same-sex attention in a performance setting” (Litwiller, 2020, p. 602). Furthermore, drag has also been said to have been developed out of “the use of flamboyant dressing as a *masquerade*” of which allows cisgender male performers to express their femininity and gender through a “separate identity that they could put on and take off” (Taylor & Rupp, 2004, p. 120, italics original). In other words,

drag, according to these academically approved definitions, is a type of performance art specifically for only cisgender (gay) men who want to express femininity through being a drag queen. Drag queens, based on Taylor and Rupp's (2004) academically well-known definition, are "gay men who dress and perform as but do not want to be women or have women's bodies" (p. 115). With these conventionally accepted definitions that have made their way into academia, drag has been painted as a masquerade and an exclusive form of performance catered towards and only valid for cisgender (gay) men, which I find incredibly problematic within the context of 2022, where the definitions of drag have shifted and evolved so much that Taylor and Rupp's (2004) definition has become outdated; not only do these definitions limit the art of drag itself as well as other drag artists (such as drag kings or individuals of other genders and sexual orientations), but it also disregards, or even erases, the rich history of how drag has come to be in the present day.

In contrast to Taylor and Rupp's definition which depicts drag as a masqueraded performance exclusive for cisgender (gay) men, drag is, on the other hand, a mode of bodily expression and stylization, a way to "play on the notion of gender" (Brennan, 2017, p. 31), and serves as a means of disrupting the heteronormative gender order and questioning its norms through "highlighting their absurdity" (Koenig, 2003, p. 149), of which stems out of the house/ball culture during the Harlem Renaissance (Rowan et al., 2013). During this time, transgender individuals, gay men, and a few heterosexual cisgender men and women of color would gather at night to celebrate and express their gender through throwing elaborate balls, or competitions that provide a safe space for "self-expression, self-actualization and communality," in which oppressed and/or discriminated individuals can express themselves in, whether it may be through displaying one's fashion or dancing (such as through voguing<sup>1</sup>) (Feldman & Hakim, 2020, p. 391; Rowan et al., 2013). This house/ball culture, as a Black and Latinx sub-counterculture, has heavily influenced how drag has come to be in the current era, continuing its traditions of houses<sup>2</sup>, balls, gender expression through fashion and dance, as well as utilizing its vernacular<sup>3</sup>, as also seen on the internationally famous reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) (and its franchises) as well as *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (2016-present) to a certain extent. Therefore, defining drag as something that is a masquerade and exclusive to only cisgender men erases its rich history filled with fluidity and subversion that was built upon by both cis and trans individuals of color as a means of expressing, or revealing, one's own self. In this way, by historicizing drag through house/ball culture, I would come to define drag in the present era as a type of artistic performance and expression in which involves an individual of any sex, gender, or sexuality who stylizes their own body in the name of self-expression and/or art, whether it may be through gendered or genderless<sup>4</sup> adornment.

## Drag in Thailand: A Western Inspiration

The Thai drag scene emerged during the late 2000s and has become a mainstream form of performance and nightlife entertainment beginning in the mid-2010s (Itthipongmaetee, 2018), even gaining international prominence with its own spin-off drag reality competition show *Drag Race Thailand* (2018-present). Due to its later entry into the scene, and especially because Thai people have had a keen interest in art forms of which are not necessarily gender driven ("Drag culture in the genderless world of 'Pan Pan Narkprasert'", 2018), it is not surprising to see that Thai drag artists

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<sup>1</sup> Voguing is a flamboyant form of "expressive dance" utilized by individuals during balls or drag performances, of which often includes specific arm movements and poses (Rowan et al., 2013, p. 184).

<sup>2</sup> Individuals who participate in balls usually (but not always) belong to a certain "house," of which includes traditional familial roles such as a father or mother who take care of their "children," although these roles are not necessarily gender specific (Fernández, 2020; Rowan et al., 2013). Some famous examples of houses include the House of Aviance, the House of LaBeija, and the House of Xtravaganza. It is also sometimes stylized as *haus*.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the words utilized within the drag community today, and even in mainstream (queer) culture and media, include "fabulous," "fierce," and "werk it" (sometimes stylized as *werg it*) (Rowan et al., 2013, p. 184).

<sup>4</sup> In this case, genderless would come to mean *not pertaining to gender*. In other words, drag expression does not have to be based on the heteronormative understandings of gender, such as alternative drag.

have adopted the historicized definition of drag in their local understandings: that drag is a form of art that reveals one's own self and is subversive and expressive in nature. Art Arya – fashion stylist, drag icon, and co-host of *Drag Race Thailand* – states in an interview with *Krungthep Turakij* (Bangkok Biz News) that a drag artist is a performer and an artist who is not afraid to express oneself through utilizing their body as a frame (Panaram, 2018). In the same interview, Pan Pan Narkprasert – an internationally famous Thai-Taiwanese drag queen, co-host of *Drag Race Thailand*, and participant on *RuPaul's Drag Race UK vs The World (2022)* – adds onto Art Arya's remarks that drag is something that is much deeper than just dressing up as a woman: it is a form of art that is on another level (Panaram, 2018).

Elsewhere, Narkprasert also explicates on the notions of *drag* and *drag queen*. In an interview with *The Matter*, a news agency in Thailand, he explains that around ninety percent of drag queens are probably gay men who dress up as women (Pattanakertpun & Meepien, 2018). Yet, he emphasizes the point that drag queens do not necessarily have to be gay; they can even be heterosexual, since gender or sex is not a deciding factor in becoming a drag queen/artist (Pattanakertpun & Meepien, 2018). Later in the interview, he even expresses his dislike of how people use these terms to limit or put people into boxes, stressing that it is not good to divide, split, or compartmentalize the (LGBTQIA+) community (Pattanakertpun & Meepien, 2018).

These thoughts are also echoed by his peers within the Thai drag community. Regarding the statement that 'drag queens are gay men', Chakgai "M" Jermkwam, owner of the first drag bar in Thailand, The Stranger Bar, states in an interview with *Khaosod English* that drag queens do not have to be gay: "Drag queens have to be gay men only? No, no, no. This is 2018, motherfucker" (Itthipongmaetee, 2018, para. 51). In the same interview, Meantra Mananya Phuengmai, a transgender woman and Thailand's Nicki Minaj impersonator, also expresses her opinion that drag is an art form that "shouldn't be defined by any specific gender" and is "an art that is free and has no boundaries" (Itthipongmaetee, 2018, para. 53).

However, it had taken quite some time before the majority of the Thai drag community had arrived at this understanding of the now-declared free-for-all art form. During the early days of the Thai drag scene, around the early- to mid-2010s, the definitions of drag were very much understood in relation to being a showgirl (*nang cho*), or trans women who live their lives as women and perform on stage as women, as the transgender showgirl scene is a very prominent nightlife entertainment art form within the Thai queer space. Siravitch Kamonworawut, Thailand's Madonna impersonator, reveals in an interview with *Post Today* in 2015 that newer Thai drag queens (at the time) would have the mentality of wanting to look beautiful like a woman due to Thailand's fame of normatively beautiful trans women, which limits the notion of drag. He also emphasizes later in the interview that being a drag queen is about wanting to parody existing gender norms in society as well as being bold, hot, campy, fierce, and having a full face of makeup, which lines up with the present understanding of drag in the West, based on Brennan (2017) and Koenig's (2003) understandings, due to him also having an Australian drag background (Itthipongmaetee, 2018; "What is hiding behind the mask?", 2015).

As can be seen, Thai understandings of the terms *drag* and *drag queen* have been heavily influenced by the West, while having a local twist. Yet, local Thai understandings of sex, sexuality, gender, and gender/sex expression are not heavily influenced by Western understandings, encompassing all Western notions into one singular notion of *phet*, as noted by Cook and Jackson (1999). With how closely related the notions of expression and drag are, genderless or not, it puts into question how different the understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality can be for Thai drag artists in comparison to Western drag artists within the globalized 21st century context. Therefore, in this paper, I will explore the notion of *phet* and its understandings, construction, and expression, as understood and experienced by local Thai drag artists to test whether an individual's understandings of *phet* in Thailand will be significantly or fundamentally different from Western drag artists through engaging in the art of drag. Furthermore, I will explore the understandings of an individual's *phet* through one's identity in and out of drag as well as through engaging in drag shows, both as a performer and as an audience.

## Theoretical Framework

Within Western contexts, especially by feminist and/or queer scholars and activists, the notions of sex and gender are understood as separate entities. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), sex, on the one hand, is a “determination” made on biological grounds in identifying individuals as *female* or *male* (p. 127). Furthermore, one is presumed to be of a certain sex through one’s sex category; a sex category can be, for example, “‘girl’ or ‘boy,’ or ‘woman’ or ‘man’” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 133). In this way, if an individual is seen to be belonging to a certain sex category in everyday life, such as presenting *boy/man* based on observations, appearances, and identification, then that presumes their sex, being *male*. On the other hand, gender is an act that is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” in which one does while taking into account the (hetero)normative understandings and attitudes that are present in one’s society of how one should act based on one’s sex category (West & Zimmerman, 1987, pp. 126-127). In this way, the doing of gender is shaped by the heteronormative understandings in which differentiate “girls and boys and women and men” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137).

However, within the Thai context, all these separate terms, being sex, sex category, and gender, are all understood within the singular, amalgamated notion of *phet*. Not only that, but within this amalgamation, the notion of sexuality is also present (Jackson, 2000). However, what Jackson (2000) means by sexuality deviates from the Western, Foucauldian understanding of sexuality, hence his usage of the term *eroticism*. In Jackson’s (2000) article, “An explosion of Thai identities: global queering and re-imagining queer theory,” he writes about the gender/sex discourse in Thailand from the 1960s to the 1980s and highlights how Thai gender/sex discourse was not merging with Western models of gender and sexuality, noting on the limitations of “Foucauldian-modelled histories of sexuality” (p. 405). In Foucault’s (1976/1978) understanding, sexuality is something that has been oppressed and restricted, or more specifically, “carefully confined” (p. 3). At first, during the seventeenth century, sexuality was out in the open, and was treated as just a mere, non-taboo act. However, by the nineteenth century, sexuality has come to be confined and regulated, turning into a taboo act that served only as a method of biological reproduction. As Foucault writes: “[n]ot only did [sexuality] not exist, it had no right to exist” (1976/1978, p. 4). As a result, people who were repressed, or othered, had to find a safe space to engage in sexual acts and in the discourse of sexuality, of which were limited to only the areas of prostitution and psychiatry. Due to this being the Foucauldian connotation of the term *sexuality*, Jackson instead deliberately utilizes the word *eroticism* to “avoid [its] Eurocentric connotations,” as sexuality has not necessarily been oppressed in the private sphere in Thailand by the state (2000, p. 408). Rather, sexuality in the private sphere in Thailand has been more free-flowing and *unregulated*, resulting with the emergence of its own unique *phet* categories/identities in the process, of which are all understood as variations of *phet*.

Because of this, Jackson (2000) asserts that the Thai notion of *phet*, with the inclusion of *eroticism*, is to be understood differently from the West, encompassing the notions of “sexual difference (male vs. female), gender difference (masculine vs. feminine) and sexuality (heterosexual vs. homosexual)” within one unified notion (p. 414). This means that the notion of *phet* not only includes sex, sex category, gender, and sexuality, but it also expresses the notions of “erotic desire... erotic acts... masculinity/maleness... [and] femininity/femaleness” (Jackson, 2000, p. 416). As a result, this notion would be understood as unique from the West, even if the notion of *phet* did have some sort of Western influence.

However, when discussing the notion of drag in Thailand, which is a topic that is closely related to the notions of sex, sex category, gender, sexuality, or *phet* itself, it seems that Thailand has merged with the West, adopting the Western definition of drag into its local understandings, which are still in use to this day. Similarly to *phet*, the notion of drag (or more accurately, cross-dressing) in Thailand has been in existence for quite some time. Yet, what differentiates drag from *phet* is that Western definitions of drag have been wholly adopted in Thailand, while certain *phet*-related neologisms – such as *gay* (from gay), *tom* (from tomboy), and *dee* (from lady) – have been used to identify *phet* categories/identities without taking on their Western denotations. Due to this, I find it fascinating to explore how Thai drag artists would understand, construct, and express their *phet* in and/or through drag.

To explore this fascination, I had tested whether an individual’s understanding of *phet* will be different from those in the West through being in and out of drag as well as engaging in drag shows as a performer and an audience

member through employing phenomenological research under the qualitative research method. By conducting this research, I believed that it would provide significant insight into how the notions of *phet* and drag are understood, constructed, and expressed by local Thai drag artists, adding a new perspective towards the field of *phet* studies as well as gender studies as a whole. With this new insight, I hoped to bring about newer and updated perspectives about how *phet* is understood in Thailand in 2022, at least showcased through the Thai drag scene, while also highlighting the importance of drag in localized, online, and global communities.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological research method. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is conducted when a “concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it” or when a research topic has “never been addressed with a certain sample or group of people” (p. 18). Since the notion of drag and *phet* have not been an extensive topic of research in English yet, being a generally unexplored localized phenomenon, I feel that it is proper to conduct qualitative research. Furthermore, by specifically employing phenomenology, which is employed to identify “the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants,” I will be able to conduct open-ended interviews in order to collect “participant meanings” about a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2009, pp. 13, 17). Not only that, but it will also allow me to make “interpretations of the data” gained, which is the goal of this research (Creswell, 2009, p. 17). In other words, through employing a phenomenological, qualitative research method, I will be able to gather first-hand data about Thai drag artists’ lived experiences and perspectives in order to use in my analysis of this, arguably new, area of study.

Due to this, the sample group of my research will be drag artists, specifically those who perform regularly at the House of Heals<sup>5</sup> bar located near BTS Chit Lom, Bangkok, Thailand. The reason as to why I have decided to conduct my research specifically at the House of Heals is because it is the home to many drag artists, both cis- and trans- gender, which would allow for many different perspectives and outlooks in relation to the notion of *phet* and its understandings, construction, and expression. Furthermore, the House of Heals has also gained international traction, being a place known by international audiences due to Pangina Heals’ and *Drag Race Thailand*’s international fanbase. With this, I would be able to gain insight into the lives of drag artists who are known internationally, potentially also providing international visibility towards the Thai notion of *phet* and its understandings, construction, and expression.

Originally, I had planned to conduct face-to-face focus group interviews with the participants at the House of Heals drag bar, but due to the sudden new Covid-19 pandemic wave, we were unable to meet in real life. Because of this, Pangina Heals suggested for me to separately contact each House of Heals regular, meeting online at their time of convenience. Unfortunately, Pangina Heals was not available for an interview during the time that this research was being conducted since she was touring in the United States after the broadcasting of *RuPaul’s Drag Race UK vs The World* in early 2022. Yet, I was still able to meet with several of the House of Heals performers online at their time of convenience, having the delightful opportunity of conducting forty-minute-long interviews with, alphabetically, Anneé Maywong (they/them), Dearis Doll (they/them), and Meannie Minaj (she/her), who have all consented to be a part of this research with their names, pronouns, and official interview answers being disclosed in this research paper (see Appendix B, Appendix C, and Appendix D for their respective interview excerpts). For each of the interviews, the following questions were asked (see Appendix A for the questions in Thai):

- (1) Personally, what is drag to you?
- (2) Before discovering drag, how did you understand the notion of *phet* and what contributed to this understanding?
- (3) Has traditional and/or social media helped or haltered your construction and expression of *phet* in any way?
- (4) How did you come to discover drag?

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<sup>5</sup> Owned by the internationally famous Thai-Taiwanese drag queen and co-host of *Drag Race Thailand*, Pangina Heals.

- (5) Has drag affected your understanding of *phet*? If so, has it changed how you construct and express your *phet* in everyday life?
- (6) In your understanding, do you perceive drag as a form of *phet*? Or is it purely an art form?
- (7) Has your construction and expression of your *phet* and/or drag persona been limited in any way?
- (8) Do you think drag shows provide a safe space which can help audiences realize, understand, and/or express their *phet*? If so, in this way, do you think drag shows are a form of activism?

## Findings and Discussion

### Current Understandings of *Phet*: A Fragmentation

In comparison to Jackson's (2000) assertion that *phet* encompasses the notions of sexual difference, gender difference, and sexuality, it seems that in recent years, the term *phet* has come to be bifurcated, such as to *phet* (sex) and *phet-saphap* (gender), due to more Western influence. Based on the interview results, I have found that newer and more distinct *phet* terms are being utilized outside of the academic sphere, such as using the term *phet-saphap* to reference gender instead of just using *phet*. This can be seen in Dearis Doll's interview, where they used the term *phet* to describe one's physique (through distinguishing genitalia) and *phet-saphap* to describe gender (see Appendix C). Furthermore, Dearis Doll and Meannie Minaj both used the term LGBT<sup>6</sup> to describe non-normative genders in their interviews as well, such as through saying that they are LGBT or belong to the world of LGBT (see Appendix C and Appendix D). In this way, it seems that this shift in the understanding of *phet* in Thailand has been heavily influenced by the West, with the fragmenting of the term *phet* to differentiate the English terms sex and gender, as well as the adopting of the term LGBT into local understandings. However, similarly to Jackson's (2011) remarks, I would like to argue that this is not necessarily a form of "cultural borrowing"; rather, it is a "new repertoire of ways to retell local stories," since all these *phet* categories, such as *gay* (from gay) and *les* (from lesbian), may have already existed in Thai society, but have yet to be officially labeled using the Thai language, as Dearis Doll also mentioned (p. 10; see Appendix C). Yet, this does not mean that there has been no instance of cultural borrowing, with newer *phet* concepts and terms, such as queer, coming into the scene along with its Western understandings.

In addition, I have found that the participants' understandings of *phet* have also been seemingly queered, or at least they border on the Western notion of queer. Although Jackson has written that the term *queer* is not used in Thailand, which is still somewhat<sup>7</sup> true, the notion of queer<sup>8</sup> has come to be used within local understandings more and more, differing from the concept of *phet* in which Jackson wrote about in the year 2000. Anneé Maywong mentioned how they had never considered *phet* at all, considering themselves as merely human. In fact, they did not see the need to identify themselves as being a boy or girl because they thought that being both was fun (see Appendix B). This, in my view, is a very queer way of thinking, considering queer as being "'a zone of possibilities' always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate" (Edelman, 1994, p. 114, cited in Jagose, 1996, p. 2). It becomes even more definite that their understanding of *phet* has been queered through their posing of this question,

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<sup>6</sup> I believe that LGBT has been shortened from the longer acronym (LGBTQIA+ and other variations) to better fit the Thai language. Since this paper is discussing the perspective of Thai drag artists about *phet* within the Thai context, I will be using the term LGBT when referencing the community, individuals who belong within this community, or instead of the term *queer*.

<sup>7</sup> Although not used in the past, the term *queer* has come to be used more and more in recent years by Thai *phet* scholars and Thai youths and/or activists who have learned about this concept.

<sup>8</sup> Queer, according to Jagose (1996), is a nascent and fluid state of being in which resists the assumed coherencies between "chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (p. 3). In other words, queer resists the heteronormatively assumed connections between one's sex, gender, and sexuality, which disrupts what Butler (1990) calls the "heterosexual matrix" (p. 35).

which shows that they understand *phet* as a zone of possibilities: “Why do I have to pay attention to something that labels a person as this or that?” (see Appendix B).

In a similar vein, Meannie Minaj’s view of *phet* has also been queered; in the interview, she describes that when she was younger, she understood *phet* as referring to physical and gendered identities, such as man, woman, *kathoei*, and *tom* (see Appendix D). However, once she came across the term gay when she was older, denoting sexuality (about men who love men and have sex with men), it enabled her to reflect on her understandings of *phet*. As a result, she has come to understand *phet* as being free flowing, noting how *phet* can be experienced in any possible way; even if she labels herself as a transgender woman or *kathoei*, she believes that she could be anything and love whoever she wants to love (see Appendix D). In other words, her understanding of *phet* has been queered, as queer is “necessarily indeterminate” as well as “a flexible space for the expression of all [non-heterosexual] cultural production and reception” (Jagose, 1996, p. 97; Doty, 1993, p. 3). In sum, these three drag artists’ understanding of *phet* have been either influenced by the Western notions of sex, gender, and sexuality or have been queered; in the case of Meannie Minaj, at least through the interviews I conducted, it has been both. This means that their understanding of *phet* is different from the writings of *phet* by Jackson (2000), showing a significant development within the understanding of *phet* in Thai society, at least in the Thai drag scene, of which is worth noting within the field of *phet* studies.

All in all, judging from the interviews, it seems that the participants’ understandings of *phet* do not differ much from Western drag artists’ understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality; that is, *phet*, for the average individual, is now understood as a fragmentation, separating into at least sex and gender, according to the interviews. However, this new-found understanding of *phet* has not been influenced by drag, as noted by the participants, possibly because the Western concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality had come into Thailand before the Western notion of drag itself. Therefore, it is not through engaging in the art of drag that the participants’ understandings of *phet* in Thailand is similar to Western drag artists’/individuals’ understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality; rather, it is through being knowledgeable of the Western concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality (arguably through the work of Thai *phet* scholars, the media, and activists) that have allowed them to understand the notion of *phet* in this manner. Not only that, but the understandings of one’s *phet* and identity in and out of drag is also the same, in the case of these Thai drag artists: drag, in the participants’ personal view, only serves as an art form (and occupation) in which allows them to perform an exaggeration of their own identity through performance and show.

### Drag as the Site of the Construction and Expression of *Phet*

Although drag has not helped the participants understand their *phet* differently or change their perspective in any clear manner – due to them doing drag after being influenced by Western notions of sex, gender, and sexuality – drag and drag shows can still potentially help those who have yet to understand their own *phet*, or the concept of *phet* and LGBT identities in general. In the West, drag and drag shows are found to have the nature of being free and “allowing for experimentation,” which can allow audiences to perform self-reflexivity<sup>9</sup> within a safe and queer space (Egner & Maloney, 2016, p. 883). From the interviews that I have conducted, it seems that this is also the case for drag shows in Thailand (at least at the House of Heals), with drag shows being a place where *phet* can be explored freely without any limitations. In this way, I would argue that it is through the created bond and emotional trust between the drag artists and the audience that gives the audience the confidence to explore their *phet*.

In Dearis Doll’s perspective, they believe that drag serves as a bridge that connects the performer to the audience, allowing them to form a deeper emotional bond (see Appendix C). They give an example of their job as a singer: when they sing out of drag, they would feel that the audience feels more reserved, remaining a spectator.

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<sup>9</sup> Self-reflexivity is the constant process of examining the self and one’s own identity through “contemporary narratives” of which includes “existing gendered and sexual discourses,” whether it may be presented in real life or the media (Pullen, 2012, p. 9; Sender, 2012, p. 215).

However, when they sing in drag, they feel that there is more audience interaction, allowing them to connect and bond with their audience. Later in the interview, they also mention a time when they were hosting a fundraiser for a charity event in drag, explaining that by being in drag, it attracted more people to come see what was happening due to the nature of drag artists being seen as more personable and approachable. Because of this, visitors felt more confident for a chat, which led to more people learning more about the charity and its causes. Dearis then compares this to being in a drag bar, stating that because the House of Heals is a place where people can freely express themselves and become liberated, their customers would feel more confident to be who they are within an accepting and trusting space. They then provided an example of their customers wearing bondage, hardcore porn-inspired leather garments to the bar, highlighting that the more extra, avant-garde, and fashion-forward one dresses up, the better. In this way, through the acceptance and approachability of drag as well as the safe and trusting atmosphere that drag and drag shows exude, it can potentially allow audiences to construct and express their *phet* freely without reservation.

In addition to the accepting and trusting aspect of drag and drag shows, drag can also potentially heal people. Anneé Maywong believes that the main purpose of drag is to exude positive energy of which one can be reminded of when having a bad day (see Appendix B). In other words, the goal of drag shows is to heal people through the positive energy that is manifested through drag artists' performances. When combining the thoughts of Dearis Doll and Anneé Maywong, it seems that drag and drag shows aim to create an accepting and trusting atmosphere in which has the potential to heal and spiritually lift audiences. With this, it can be argued that through trust, acceptance, and healing, a safe space can be created, potentially allowing audiences to express themselves without any inhibitions. This, arguably, also includes the construction and expression of one's *phet*, of which does not need to be based on heteronormative, conventional, or societal limitations or ideologies.

In the same way, Meannie Minaj feels that drag has the potential to heal audiences, which can allow for performers to form an emotional bond with the audience, especially because drag bars are a "safe zone" for everyone (as in being non-judgmental of non-normative genders), whether it may be the employees, the owner, or the audience (see Appendix D). As a performer, Meannie Minaj expresses the joy she receives when she sees her audience being moved with her performance in accordance with the mood that she wants to convey: to have fun with her, to be sad with her, and to laugh along with her. In this way, it shows the power that drag possesses in relation to emotion and psychological connection – that through the bond and mutual trust between the drag artists and the audience, it allows both parties to freely emote, express themselves, and be true to who they are. As a result, through this bond and mutual trust, as well as being within a "safe zone," it can potentially allow audiences to have the courage and the comfortability to construct and express their *phet* (see Appendix D).

As can be seen, through the created bond and emotional trust between the drag artists and the audience through drag and drag shows, it can allow for audiences to reflect on their own selves, possibly performing self-reflexivity, which can potentially lead to the construction and expression of one's *phet* within an accepting and healing space. However, it is not that Thai drag and drag shows do not play on the notion of gender or that it does not disrupt the heteronormative gender order, as Thai drag artists seem to have a free flowing, queer, and/or Western-influenced understanding on the notion of *phet*, as aforementioned in the previous discussion section. Instead, what seems to mainly allow audiences to construct and express their *phet* is mostly through experimentation within a safe, accepting, and healing space, of which emotionally encourages individuals through the art of drag.

## Drag as a Form of Activism

Due to the accepting and healing nature of drag, as previously discussed, drag is believed to be a form of activism within Thai society, and, arguably, globally. Drag, at least in the Western world, is definitely political. Notably with

The Cockettes<sup>10</sup> in the late 1960s as well as the involvement of drag queens in the 1969 Stonewall Riots<sup>11</sup>, drag and activism have come to go hand in hand, solidifying the commonly used phrase *drag is political*. Even in recent years, drag queens have been politically outspoken, whether it may be in relation to marriage equality, trans rights, #BlackLivesMatter, or the #MeToo movement (Villarreal, 2018).

Drag in Thailand is also political. With the rise of the #FreeYouth protests in 2020 that demanded human rights as well as systematic and political reform following the 2014 military coup and the “flawed election” of 2019<sup>12</sup> (McCargo, 2021, p. 177), there has also been a rise in drag artist participation within these protests. Especially with the protests regarding human rights and marriage equality, particular Thai drag artist activist groups have been seen in active participation, rallying and performing on several notable occasions. One of these protests include the November 28, 2021 mass protest concerning marriage equality, where protesters gathered signatures in front of Central World mall to draft the people’s version of the marriage bill and demanded a change from gendered to gender-neutral terms in the marriage bill in the attempt to legalize marriage for all (“Compilation of #mob28November 2021”, 2021). During this protest, drag artists Pangina Heals and Angele Anang were seen performing the song “When You Believe” by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. Due to this, the phrase *drag is political* is also valid within the context of Thai society.

When asked about whether they think drag can be a form of activism, all the participants of this study answered yes. For Anneé Maywong, they believe that drag can bring about societal change if people do not judge; as long as there are people who judge, or as long as people do not respect each other’s human rights, then not much can be changed. In other words, Anneé believes that by respecting each other as individuals and having open minds, drag can bring about change in the society in regard to human rights issues and LGBT acceptance. In a similar manner, Dearis Doll also echoes Anneé’s sentiments, saying that drag can be a form of activism in which can pave the way towards LGBT acceptance. Especially with how cisgender heterosexual men and women have come to do drag as well in the present day, Dearis Doll believes that this can allow for drag and LGBT visibility in Thai society, resulting in people becoming more educated with LGBT culture and understanding LGBT individuals (see Appendix C). Unsurprisingly, Meannie Minaj also has a similar stance, noting that with the emergence of new Thai drag artists on social media, it can create voices that can reach more people, allowing for more LGBT visibility while showing people that LGBT individuals are not weird or abnormal (see Appendix D). Because of this, she believes that drag can be a force that can bring about change – change being the acceptance of non-normative *phet* and viewing individuals with non-normative *phet* as regular human beings. Therefore, it can be said that through open-mindedness and visibility of Thai drag in the media, drag can be a form of activism that can bring about change, resulting in the progression of human rights and gender equality in Thailand. In this way, it is as if the open nature of drag and drag shows have inspired the participants to believe that if the society were to have the mindset of drag artists and drag shows – that is, being accepting, non-judgmental, trusting, and freeing – then the society will be able to move forward towards equality as well, just like how their audiences could construct and express their *phet* freely in their own shows. In other words, through drag and the mindset of drag (or open-mindedness, in general) can one begin to mobilize for change regarding LGBT acceptance and tolerance in Thai society.

However, Meannie Minaj argues that this change can only occur if and only if we have a better government, political system, and educational system. In this way, she criticizes how we should change the government, of which is currently filled with “million-year-old dinosaurs and turtles” (see Appendix D); in other words, she is saying that the point of change is not to first strive for social acceptance, but rather to first change the country’s problematic

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<sup>10</sup> An anti-capitalist drag troupe that was involved in “feminist, gay and civil rights liberation movements” who put on shows and released short films that subverted heteronormative gender norms as well as criticized and challenged capitalist culture (Feldmen & Hakim, 2020, p. 389).

<sup>11</sup> which is regarded as one of the starting points of the “modern LGBTQ2+ rights movement” (Devor & Haefele-Thomas, 2019, p. 31)

<sup>12</sup> It is deemed as flawed due to the conservative political party having won allegedly by “manipulating the voting system” (McCargo, 2021, p. 177).

system and its leaders. By doing so, the views held by the ruling class can start to become more tolerant and accepting, which will potentially lead to the society's view being changed as well. Not only that, but she also expresses how the current and past governments have tried to limit and censor LGBT visibility in the media due to it not being in line with governmental regulations. With this, it is clear to see Meannie Minaj's stance as to why the root of the problem (the government) should first be changed before the discussion of social acceptance of LGBT individuals can even be made; as long as the government tries to limit and censor individuals with non-normative genders, social acceptance cannot begin. In other words, insofar as there is a lack of drag and LGBT visibility and representation in the media, one cannot yet fully mobilize for change in Thai society.

Meannie Minaj then continues with her critique of the political and education system, saying that it is these currently existing systems that serve as obstacles that are preventing Thai society from moving forward towards LGBT acceptance and tolerance. Furthermore, she argues that she does not only blame the current junta government for this lack of improvement, but also the system that is rooted within Thailand as a whole, of which has existed for decades or even centuries. Because of this, it can be argued that with government censorship and limitations, it results in the lack of LGBT education and visibility, preventing the current population and future generations from understanding and recognizing that non-normative *phet* individuals exist and deserve equal rights.

However, Meannie Minaj does recognize that *phet* acceptance and education has improved throughout the years. Yet, this improvement has only come to fruition due to Internet access. Nonetheless, she states that it is not possible for Thai people to accept *phet* or drag wholeheartedly if the system remains unimproved. In this way, without first changing the root of the problem, it is not possible for society to hold opinions other than ones congruent to the conventional, oppressing, and government-constructed ideologies, of which have been constructed by the ruling class to benefit only the ruling class. Therefore, the root of the problem, being Thailand's government and its political and education systems, must first be changed before the society can be changed.

As can be seen through the interviews, drag in Thailand is, indeed, political. However, with the participants' answers in mind, I would argue that drag in Thailand is not only just political, but it is also personal; every issue that has been brought up regarding drag activism is in some way related to the drag artists themselves or those within the LGBT community. Because of this, through having a personal connection with the fight for equal rights, human rights, and LGBT acceptance and tolerance, it makes drag a political and personal art that can bring about change in society – change no matter collective (governmental/systematic change) or individual (the realization of *phet*).

## Drag in Thailand

In this final section, I would like to attempt to describe what drag in Thailand is according to the participants of this study. However, I would like to note the limitations of defining drag in Thailand based on my research. Due to my research being conducted with the regular performers at the House of Heals bar, of which is in central Bangkok, what I write about drag in Thailand in this section is not representative of all Thai drag; instead, it is only a facet of Thai drag that is represented and done in central Bangkok by a certain group of artists. Therefore, drag in other locations, such as a different province or region, may be completely different. Not only that, but another limitation of this study is how drag, for the participants, is not a pure form of art, since all participants have mentioned that they utilize this art form as part of their job. Nonetheless, I will attempt to describe what mainstream Thai drag is like while noting my limitations.

According to the participants of this study, Thai drag is an art form that is used to artistically express one's self through adornment, emotion, and performance. Furthermore, drag in Thailand, or at least cross-dressing, is an art form that has existed for quite some time, even before the Western understanding of drag had come into Thailand in the mid-2010s. In my interview with Anneé Maywong, they had stated that they feel that drag culture in Thailand has existed for more than a century, tracing it back to the reign of Rama VI (1910-1925). During that era, when Thai theater culture was booming, men would dress up as women to entertain people at different parties outside of the

palace because women had to remain inside the palace (see Appendix B; Brandon, 1967). Because of this, Anneé feels that drag has been in Thai society for quite some time – just that the understanding of Western drag had yet to be adopted. In this way, it shows that the Western understanding of drag that is used in Thailand in the present time can also be another form of local story retelling, which is similar to Jackson's (2011) argument regarding the adopting of English terms within local understandings of *phet*. However, this is not to say that Thai drag is not influenced by Western drag at all since components of Western drag can be seen in Thai drag today (see Literature Review).

Furthermore, drag in Thailand, similarly to the West, is a form of art that is revealing, accepting, limitless, and expressive in nature. Anneé Maywong feels that drag is a free form of artistic and *phet* expression because they can express themselves in drag in any way they want, depending on how they feel:

On some days, I would have a fully beat face, but not wear a bra or put on pads [...] Not having breasts is also fine. Or on other days, I would have a fully beat face, but I would draw on a beard to look like a masculine man [...] I feel like I can do it all. If I want to do something, I could really do it, so I feel like there is no limitation or *phet* in drag itself. (See Appendix B)

Similarly, Meannie Minaj also feels that drag is a limitless art form that one can utilize to express one's self, comparing it to her prior experiences of being a *nang cho*:

When I was a *nang cho*, only if you were beautiful, you would be able to perform a headlining song or be the star of the show [...] Being a *nang cho* has its limitation that states that you have to be a certain way to be considered a showgirl, but drag can be anything – it is anything you want it to be. When I had come to do drag, I felt that it was broad; it could be anything and no one can limit us. (See Appendix D)

Through the interview results, it can be seen that drag is a limitless and free art form in which one can utilize to express one's self and one's *phet* in any way one desires.

However, drag can also be limiting within the Thai space; yet, this limitation borders on the concept of *kalathesa*, according to Dearis Doll. *Kalathesa* is a Thai term that means “time and place” (Jackson, 2016, p. 133); in other words, because of *kalathesa* (or social appropriateness), one can be limited by one's own self according to when and where one does drag and who one does drag for. In the interview, Dearis talks about doing drag in a Buddhist temple. Because they were in a temple (a traditional place) and was interviewing one famous and respected Thai folk music artist (who they were in drag for), Dearis had to limit their own drag expression to fit the *kalathesa* of their situation while remaining true to their own self and their art:

The drag that I put on was a traditional Thai dress – a beautiful traditional Thai dress. I can put on drag makeup, but style the hair more neatly and put on small earrings as to not make it look too much or overwhelming, while staying within the realm of drag that I can use to do my job. By doing this and going to the interview, it is giving respect to the interviewee as well as being proper in a temple. (See Appendix C)

Therefore, although drag in Thailand is considered as a limitless art form, it can be self-limiting when the Thai concept of *kalathesa* comes into play. In other words, in consideration of *kalathesa*, one may be led to limit one's own self and self-expression in drag. Yet, this limitation is more of an internal one than an external one; because of this, I would still consider Thai drag as a limitless art form – just that under certain contexts and social cues must one consider modifying one's drag expression to fit the time and place of one's situation, such as for a particular outing or event.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Thai drag artists' understandings, construction, and expression of *phet* in Thailand are not significantly or fundamentally different from drag artists in the West. Furthermore, the understanding of a drag artist's *phet* out of drag remains the same if they are in drag; this is because drag, for these participants, only serves as an art form in which is utilized as a means of exaggerating one's own self and/or personality. In other words, drag, for Anneé Maywong, Dearis Doll, and Meannie Minaj, had no effect in their understandings of *phet* whatsoever; this is most likely because the English terms sex, gender, and sexuality had influenced local understandings before Western drag had come into Thailand. However, all the participants feel that engaging in drag shows can help individuals construct and

express their own *phet*, due to its trusting, accepting, healing, and freeing nature. Through this, it can allow individuals to be true to one's own self, being able to go beyond the heteronormative and societal limitations and interpretations of *phet*. Not only that, but drag and drag shows can also be a form of activism, serving as a force that can bring about change in society. Yet, this change, according to Meannie Minaj, must first be made with the government and its systems, because without changing the root of the problem, the society's perspectives cannot start to change, resulting in the impossibility of complete LGBT acceptance and tolerance.

In this paper, I had aimed to lay down the foundations of Thai drag and *phet* in the attempt to provide background understanding of Thai drag. I also briefly touched upon the notion of Thai drag activism. However, I would like to emphasize that the political aspect of this paper is still lacking, and the discourse of Thai drag activism and Thai drag politics needs to be further discussed and researched about. With the information presented and discussed in this paper, I hope that this can be the beginning of political discussion in the Thai drag scene, further bringing light to and highlighting the importance of drag within localized and politicized Thai contexts, whether it may be in relation to the LGBT community, LGBT rights, human rights, marriage equality, or bettering the Thai society in general.

## Acknowledgements

I owe a big thank you to my advisor Professor Dr. Porranee Singpliam for her continuous support and guidance in all my academic endeavors, my parents for their loving encouragement, and my friend Mild for helping me refine my arguments in a clearer and more concise manner.

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