

**One Night in Bangkok:  
Western Women's Interactions with Sexualized Spaces in Thailand**

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## **Abstract**

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Research on sex tourism in Thailand has often focused on western men's sexual interactions with local women (Cohen, 1982; Enloe, 1989; Brown, 2001), and the sexualized entertainment on offer in eroticized tourist spaces/places is assumed to be aimed at western male tourists (Manderson, 1992; Bowes, 2004). While a number of academics have studied sexualized spaces and venues, little has been written on how and to what extent western women engage with this type of touristic entertainment in the Thai (sex tourism) context (Odzer, 1994; Manderson, 1995; Sikes, 2006). This is despite the fact that the number of female tourists visiting Thailand has increased over the past decade (TAT, 2007), and some evidence suggests that the sex industry in Thailand caters for female tourists (Vorakitphokatorn et al, 1994; Williams et al, 2007).

This thesis will argue that western women are curious about the nature of the Thai sex industry, and that some tourist women seek to visually explore sexualized tourist areas as part of their 'tourist experience' in Thailand. Sex tourism is a contentious subject area, and investigating the extent to which western women might engage with the sex industry as part of their tourist experience necessitates a critical engagement with theoretical understandings of female sex tourism. The findings suggest that western women's desire for an authentic tourist experience in Thailand facilitates their entry into sexualized zones. While the history of the sex industry in Thailand has helped to popularize its notoriety, discourses on tourist-oriented sexual spaces suggest that visiting a sexual show is something that is 'ok', and further is part of 'real Thailand'. However, women's visual engagement with the Others who inhabit these spaces reveals a darker side, and perhaps a voyeuristic desire to visit these venues. While part of their motivation to consume the sex industry stems from their understanding of the sex industry as authentically Thai, their contradictory interpretations of Thai sex workers reveals a darker, more complicated picture.

This thesis will examine the lines that divide tourism from sex tourism practices to suggest that consuming difference and the desire to engage with exotic (and erotic) Others underpins all touristic engagements, including tourist interactions with the sex industry. Visual sex tourism practices will be outlined here, and current definitions of sex tourism will be deconstructed to reveal a more complicated picture of tourism/sex tourism practices, which calls for a closer examination of gendered tourism behaviors.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2005 I went to Thailand for the first time to carry out research for a Master's degree dissertation. I spent some time researching organizations that worked with sex workers interviewing staff members and sex workers affiliated with these groups. This was my first trip to Thailand and my first research fieldwork trip. I remember being overwhelmed by the sheer difference of an Asian country - in particular by the noise and chaos that was part of the Bangkok experience. As I was studying the sex industry as part of my research project, I was also interested in the ways the sex industry was presented in Thailand, and how sex tourism was part of this. I was aware that there were sexualized tourist areas where male tourists were meant to go (Patpong for example, or Soi Cowboy), and I assumed these spaces were off limits to women. However, a weekend trip to Pattaya made me rethink this initial assumption, as I saw large numbers of women in sexualized areas, and noticed many of them were going into venues advertising go-go bars or sex shows. After I finished my research with the Thai sex work organizations, I came back the UK with a slightly confused understanding of what sex tourism was all about, and who might be considered a sex tourist. This confusion was an important starting point for my PhD research, as I began to consider how western women might fit into sex tourism processes more generally, and then decided to explore the Thai sex industry from this different perspective.

In October of 2007 I went to Thailand to begin my ethnographic study of the sex industry for my PhD. The aim of my exploration was to try to understand to what extent western women engaged with the sex industry in Thailand, and how they felt about touring a country with such a visible sex-tourist industry. I spent the first month of my visit in Pattaya, a well-known sex tourist coastal city not far from Bangkok. As I started getting acquainted with the city, I spent a good deal of time in the red light areas, trying to get a feel for what kinds of

spaces/places tourists were visiting. Female tourists seemed to go everywhere in Pattaya; there were few bars, clubs, or shows that did not host western female guests. One of the challenges I faced as a researcher was deciding how far into these sexualized spaces I should travel. During the first month I visited a number of different types of sexualized venues: open air go-go bars, *kathoey*<sup>1</sup>(or ladyboy) cabaret shows, male and female go-go bars, and discothèques<sup>2</sup>. Although the highly sexualized nature of the areas was sometimes overwhelming, I was often able to have positive and friendly exchanges with the customers who were present as well as the staff who were working there, which made interactions in this space more manageable.

I was aware that a more overtly sexual form of entertainment existed: the ping pong show. In the few weeks that I had been in Thailand I had heard female tourists talk about the ping pong shows, listening to them describe the various ‘tricks’ and sexual activities they saw at these venues. There were several ping pong shows in the main tourist area of Pattaya, and I had seen groups of tourists (male and female) paying their entrance fee and walking through the heavy red curtains, but this was an area I felt some ambivalence about visiting myself. I knew from conversations and interviews with female tourists that this was considered a Thai tourist spectacle not to be missed, an ‘authentic’ part of Thai culture, but I was also troubled by the graphic images presented in these conversations, and unsure about how I would handle this type of ‘entertainment’. And yet, the western women I spoke to were surprised I had not been and expressed confusion about why I- someone researching the sex industry- would not have visited this important Thai/touristic/sexual space.

My decision to visit a ping pong show came about one evening in November, after an interview with two Scandinavian women. So emphatic was their description of the shows they

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<sup>1</sup> *Kathoey* is a Thai word that refers to people of the ‘third gender’, usually male-to-female transsexuals who are seen to be somewhat fluid in terms of their sexuality, but often self-identify as gay. See Jackson (2000) or Jackson and Sullivan (1999) for more on Thai sexual identities.

<sup>2</sup> An explanation and typology of these various sexual sites/venues will be provided in Chapter Two.

had been to, so incredulous was their surprise that I had not been, that I felt it was almost my duty as an ethnographer to finally visit one of these sexualized shows so that I could understand the fascination that they felt, and so I could explore western women's motivations to visit these sexual shows and their desire to engage with this type of activity.

The night after this interview, I made my way to the red light area of the city where I had seen ping pong shows being advertised. It is nearly impossible to travel along Walking Street as a tourist (male or female) without being confronted by a Thai tout passing out flyers for a ping pong show, and a few seconds after stepping into this sexualized zone I was invited to see a 'ping pong pussy show'. We negotiated a price, 500 baht<sup>3</sup> for the show and a drink, and I was duly led down away from the main pedestrian area down a small *soi* (street) where the ping pong show was located. After paying my fee, I was taken up a narrow flight of stairs to a large room with tiered seating banked around an elevated stage. On the stage was a Thai woman wearing a fluorescent pink bra and nothing else. As I was directed to my seat on the far side of the stage, she began to pull out colored string from her vagina. Yards and yards of neon plastic roping emerged from her vagina, as onlookers clapped and laughed at the spectacle. I was placed in my seat, given my drink, and left to watch the show unfold.

I spent nearly an hour at the ping pong show, watching the tricks performed by the sex workers, watching the customers and their interactions with the hostesses (who were serving drinks and flirting with customers - offering a number of more intimate services), and watching couples and groups of men and women laugh, shout, and cheer at the tricks being performed. I saw Thai sex workers pulling strings of straight razor blades and live animals out of their vaginas; I saw Thai women engaging in sexual acts for the audience; I watched as one particular woman on stage, looking drunk or maybe drugged and struggling to focus in her dazed state, was barely able to dance. There was very little interaction between the customers and the performers. As much as I had tried to prepare myself for the experience, I was ill-

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<sup>3</sup> In November 2007, 500 baht was roughly equivalent to 15USD or 10GBP

equipped to deal with everything that I saw at the show. I had found the show unpleasant and I was disturbed at the dazed state of many of the sex workers. I was astounded that these shows were popular with tourists, that anyone would go to see these shows not just once but several times. I was upset by the tourist woman sitting next to me who had been so visibly excited and entertained by the show that I had been disturbed watching. In the hours after I left the show I found it difficult to deal with the disconcerting images I had been confronted with and left to wonder, how was it that I could feel distraught watching the show yet so many women could visit these places and somehow enjoy and be entertained by this sexualized experience?

### **The Thai Sex Industry**

Western women are understood by policy makers to be uninterested in or put off by the sex industry in Thailand (Bowes, 2004; Renton, 2005). Indeed, tourism officials in Thailand have suggested that enticing more western women to Thailand might help lessen the sex tourist trade (Bowes, 2004). This premise is based upon a number of assumptions, firstly that women will have no interest in engaging with the sex industry as part of their visit to Thailand, and secondly that sex tourism hinges upon western men's sexual interactions with local women. However, the sex tourism industry in Thailand is not as straightforward as it might first appear; this thesis will argue that the interactions of male and female tourists with sexual spaces - with the Thai sex industry - requires a more careful examination.

Defining what counts as part of the sex industry in Thailand is not straightforward; while some venues within the sex industry are set up to employ sex workers who will sell direct sexual services to clients who want to engage in sexual relations, many of the sexual spaces/places offer more than simply cash-for-sex exchanges. The economy of many of the sexualized venues is built not upon selling sex, but rather enticing in customers to buy drinks (Wilson, 2004). While prostitution is certainly the focus of much of the tourist-oriented sex

market, this thesis will argue that the Thai sex industry is remarkably varied in the types of entertainment that are on offer to both male and female tourists.

Additionally, the ways in which tourists seek out and engage with these sexual spaces goes beyond the limits of what normally defines sex tourism. I will argue that contrary to the popular understanding of female tourists' behavior in Thailand, women are actually interested in the sex industry, and in some instances seek it out as part of the tourist experience. My interactions with female tourists in Thailand often centered on discussions of ping pong shows, or sexual areas (like Patpong in Bangkok, or Walking Street in Pattaya), or about the nature of prostitution in this developing context. Most of the women I met were intrigued by the sex industry, were curious about the Thai Others who worked in these sexual zones, and some of them explored these areas as part of their tourist experience. The research presented here suggests that some western women are interested in visually exploring the sex industry during their visit to Thailand- some western women suggest they want to see these red light areas and partake in ping pong shows during their visit- and even the women who do not visit sexualized venues are often fascinated by the sex tourist trade that is so visible in these tourist cities.

### **Tourism as a Starting Point: Grounding Gendered and Sex Tourism Processes**

The sex industry in Thailand has often been understood as a masculine space, constructed to satisfy the whims and desires of western male tourists. Most authors, both academic and journalistic, that deal with sex tourism in Thailand point to the hordes of male tourists who visit the country every year in search of sexual (and sometimes romantic) relationships with Thai sex workers (Enloe, 1989; Truong, 1990; Manderson, 1992; Leheny, 1995; Seabrook, 1997; Bishop and Robinson, 1998). However, there has been relatively little discussion about western women's interactions with these sexualized spaces, despite the fact that numbers of western women tourists have (on average) been increasing over the past few decades (TAT,

2007). Indeed, western women have often been overlooked in their tourist capacity in Thailand, and in terms of the analyses of sexual markets, rendered invisible in these areas.

### **Gendering Tourism: Exploring Embodiment and Space**

Part of the reason women's tourist engagements may have been overlooked is because tourism studies have traditionally excluded gender as a category of analysis (Swain, 1995; Aitchison, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Swain, 2002). Tourism processes have often been situated within a masculinized framework, and the role of the tourist, (often symbolized by the flaneur, the ultimate urban observer) has been frequently highlighted as a symbol of larger (masculine) tourism processes (Wolff, 1985; Jenks, 1995; Wearing et al, 2010). Some authors (Jokinen and Veijola, 1994; 1997) have suggested that the (post)modern condition has been understood from a male perspective, and that the alienated tourist, be he vagabond, stroller, flaneur, or tourist are all part of a masculine symbolic order. Women have not been properly understood as tourists, and assuming that women occupy the same symbolic order can lead to an understanding of tourism that fails to recognize the diversity of (gendered) tourism practices. It is likely that women engage in touristic behaviors in different ways than their male counterparts might and as such it behooves researchers to ask questions about women's experiences of tourism, looking at how women understand themselves as tourists. How do they relate to the tourist experience, and do women create and maintain their own distinct tourist identity? In response to these questions, the gendered body and gendered experiences of tourism have been developed in more recent years and the importance of women's experience of tourism have been highlighted in relation to their embodied tourist practices (Jokinen and Veijola, 1997; Johnston, 2001; 2002; Swain, 2002).

The embodied practices of space are relevant for tourism practices (Crouch, 2002) and the embodied, gendered ways that space is consumed/explored have a particular relevance for understanding gendered touristic behaviors. Gendered analyses of tourism have often looked

at the way people use space, investigating the ways in which women and men inhabit and explore spaces and places differently; the management and consumption of spaces is an important component of understanding tourism practices: 'the conceptualization of the use of space is obviously relevant to tourism studies, as the very act of touring and sightseeing involves the use and consumption of space' (Gibson, 2001: 24). Men and women do not have equal access to space as some spaces are 'off-limits' to women, particularly sexualized spaces (Hubbard et al, 2008; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008). Women and men often use and consume space differently as part of their tourism practices, and their use of space may well impact upon the types of activities they engage in, the types of spaces they visit, and the types of Others they come across. Wearing et al (2010) suggest that tourists and hosts co-create tourist spaces and imbue particular sites/sights with meaning, and that within these tourist spaces women are able to create their own meanings and interpretations of tourist sites as they engage in feminized tourism practices. Women's experiences of travel have been reconceptualized within this gendered framework, and the tourism practices of women (particularly solo female travelers) have been seen as journeys of liberation and independence from traditional feminine roles (Kinnaird and Hall, 2000; Elsrud, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Wearing et al, 2010). Western women seem to be empowered by their travel experiences, and their journeys in some ways allow them to redefine their gender identity for themselves (Gibson, 2001; Elsrud, 2001).

The way that tourists use, engage with, and utilize space can reveal a great deal about gendered and cultural practices. Places/spaces are imbued with specific meanings- for example sexual bars in Thailand are understood to be inhabited by local Thai sex workers, and used by western male tourists; different bodies inhabit and explore spaces differently depending on their social position and this can vary greatly depending on one's gender, one's class, or one's race. The way that men and women inhabit spaces can reveal a great deal about the gendered practices of a society or culture, and this is also true when exploring the ways in which men and women inhabit tourist spaces. Examining the gendered practices of tourism

can tell us something about the local culture that is being visited, and reveals a great deal about the ways in which gendered and raced/sexed practices are contextualized both at 'home' and 'away'. Understanding the positionality of the people who occupy and inhabit particular spaces and places is important for understanding wider social contexts, as certain spaces are imbued with meaning, and places become coded and located within a cultural structure (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 1979).

### **Gendering Sex Tourism Practices**

Men's and women's experiences of tourism have been understood very differently, especially their experiences of sex tourism. This is partly due to a rather commonly held assumption about sex tourism that suggests western men travel to foreign countries to engage in sexual relations with (younger, Other) local women (Cohen, 1982; 1986; Enloe, 1989; Cohen, 1993; Seabrook, 1997; Phillip and Dann, 1998; Jeffreys, 2003). Sanchez Taylor argues that 'The stereotypical image of the "sex tourist" is that of the Western man who travels to Thailand or the Philippines in order to pay for sex with Go Go bar/brothel prostitutes' (Sanchez Taylor, 2001:749). This stereotypical masculine traveler, this male sex tourist, is seen in much of the literature on sex tourism practices; academic and journalistic accounts of sex tourism tend to focus on the western men who travel to sun-drenched foreign locales to engage in sexual relations with Other women. While there has been some debate in the literature about issues such as intentionality and the nature of sexual relationships with regards to male sex tourism (Ryan and Kinder, 1996; Oppermann, 1999) and some important contributions on issues related to power and privilege (Crick, 1989; O'Connell Davidson, 1996; Pettman, 1997; Kempadoo, 1998; Cabezas, 2004), by and large sex tourism is often seen as an extension of prostitution, where men are configured as 'users' of prostitutes.

There was been some acknowledgement that western women can also engage in sexual relationships with foreign men as part of their holiday experience. However, discussions

around women who engage in similar sexual activities have been much more contentious and hotly debated within the social sciences. This controversy is due to a number of factors: firstly there are arguments within feminism about the extent to which women are victims-versus-agent/capable of exploiting, which can also be seen in broader debates around prostitution (Segal and MacIntosh, 1993; Raymond, 1995; Barry, 1996; Chapkis, 1997; Jeffreys, 1997; Nagle, 1997; Campbell and O'Neill, 2006; O'Connell Davidson, 2006). Secondly because sex tourism is often defined in such a narrow way- as directly related to prostitute-use and commercially sexual relationships- this has made it much more difficult to talk about female sex tourism as a phenomenon because women are not generally associated with using prostitutes, nor are they generally connected to commercially sexual exchanges (Ryan and Hall, 2001). Research into female sex tourism is still a contested area; situating women's position within the sex tourist spectrum is not straightforward, and problems arise within academic discourses around sex tourism on how to define what exactly constitutes sex tourist behavior, and further what defines sex tourism practices.

In contrast to male sex tourists who are often understood to be exploiting local women, the actions of female sex tourists have sometimes been presented in a more benevolent, but also a more contradictory way. They are sometimes seen as rather innocent 'romance tourists' (Meisch, 1995; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Dahles and Bras, 1999), or even understood as romantic dupes being exploited by local men (Jeffreys, 2003). There has been some critique of this rather essentialist understanding of western female tourists' sexual behaviors (de Albuquerque, 1998; Herold et al, 2001; Kempadoo, 2001; Ryan and Hall, 2001; Frohlick, 2008). Sanchez Taylor (2001; 2006) provides a critique of this understanding of women's interactions with local men, and suggests that female 'romance tourists' are understood as women 'who buy meals and gifts for [their] local sexual partner[s] [and are] enjoying a "romance", not using a prostitute'. Tourist women are often seen as 'passive innocents, "used" by local men who are actively seeking money, a ticket off the island and maybe love, as well as sexual experience' (2001:750). Sanchez Taylor persuasively argues sex tourism is

not simply about 'male patriarchal privilege and female powerlessness' (2001:749). Indeed, she posits:

...female tourists' sexual-economic relationships with local men are predicated upon the same global economic and social inequalities that underpin the phenomenon of male sex tourism. The fact that parallels between male and female sex tourism are overlooked reflects and reproduces weaknesses in existing theoretical and commonsense understandings of gendered power, sexual exploitation, prostitution, and sex tourism (2006:43).

This analysis of sex tourism takes gendered relations into account, but also provides a critical reflection about other types of power- economic, social, racial, and class- that are often obscured by focusing so exclusively on the power/gender dyad. Analyses of tourism often look at issues relating to racial and global inequalities, and there has been some evidence to suggest that the processes that govern tourism and sex tourism are intrinsically related (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Ryan and Hall, 2001). However much of the analysis of sex tourism practices still rely on gendered understandings of sex and sexual relationships, rather than exploring the other inequalities that might exist between hosts and guests of any gender.

Rather than starting from the position that sex tourism can be simply categorized as western *men* traveling for sex, it might be more useful to look at the power relations that govern interactions between tourists and Others, and to employ a model that does not rely so exclusively on essentialist assumptions about the nature of women's and men's (sexual) relationships. We might more usefully define sex tourism as Julia O'Connell Davidson does: 'a broad term to describe the activities of individuals who, whether or not they set out with this intention, use their economic power to attain powers of sexual command over local women, men and/or children while traveling for leisure purposes' (O'Connell Davidson, 1998:75). This type of definition would allow for a much wider scope for defining sex

tourism and sex-tourist activities, would refer to a wider range of people (both male and female) geographical locations, and sexual practices, geographical locations (O'Connell Davidson 1998: 75). This definition acknowledges the power difference between 'first world' tourists and 'third world' sex workers, without subscribing to an essentialist gender ideology.

Indeed these more expansive categories of analysis are sometimes absent from discussions of sex tourism. A more nuanced picture begins to emerge around the set of issues that underlies women's sexual engagement with local men if we begin to understand women tourists: 'as being motivated by racist sexual stereotypes and using sex tourism to bolster their privileged race and class status' (Jeffreys, 2003:25)<sup>4</sup>. By employing this understanding it is possible to analyze female sex tourism without focusing *exclusively* on gender injustices, and instead other crucial structural inequalities such as race and class can also be included.

### **Consuming Difference: Exotic/Erotic Others**

Understanding gendered experiences of tourism, particular in (sexual) tourism to the developing world, necessitates adopting a pluralist perspective that also acknowledges the importance of race, class, and nationality for tourism processes, *in addition to gender* (Gibson, 2001: 22). Elsrud (2001) suggests that female tourists are empowered by their risky encounters in developing countries, and their understanding of the 'third world' and the subalterns that occupy these risky spaces as 'primitive' or 'poor' (2001: 598). Indeed, this understanding of Others in tourism is often a problematic area within tourism studies (Sanchez Taylor, 2000; Gibson, 2001; Wilson, 2004). Sanchez Taylor (2000) argues that consuming difference is a critical component of the tourist experience, and that exotic Others are positioned as markers of cultural authenticity. Consuming difference means that local people are often positioned as authentic tourist objects, and their bodies become a way for tourists to consume the difference that is such an important part of the tourist experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffreys (2003) actually argues against this definition.

The ways in which tourist and sex tourist markets overlap is a key theme of exploration in this thesis, and is critically important in the Thai context. Work by various academic critics on tourism policy in Thailand has pointed to the ways in which politics, religion, and power overlap (Richter, 1989; Truong, 1990; Leheny, 1995) in the Thai context. Bishop and Robinson (1998) and Ryan and Hall (2001) both draw attention to the discursive ways in which tourism is produced, and highlight the machinations of the market that drives both tourism and sex tourism from the same starting point.

Ryan and Hall (2001) suggest that tourism and sex tourism are both concerned with elements of the spectacle; at the heart of many tourism and sex tourism experiences lies a desire for difference and for adventure. Tourists desire experience, exciting moments that can be lived in the marginal spaces out of time and out of context:

The usual routine is set aside, and often travel to other places is involved...we leave behind occupational roles, social frameworks that guide or constrain our actions, and enter a period which society sanctions as a period of release from normal responsibilities. *From this perspective sex tourism is located firmly within the wider discourses of tourism* (Ryan and Hall, 2001:8 emphasis added).

The consumer element of the sex tourism experience is also a point of intersection with wider tourism processes, as the exotic Other becomes the object of the tourist gaze (Desmond, 1997; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Edmondson, 2001; Urry, 2002). The desire for the exotic Other is a common tourist trope, and the importance of consuming difference enters into tourism discourses.

The bodies of Thai women in particular have become situated as the suitable objects of the tourist gaze (a point which will be followed through in more detail in Chapter Three), and

Ryan and Hall argue that ‘...it is of little surprise that because of the marginality of location, peoples and the exoticism ascribed to those people, sex tourism has become a sustainable force at the commencement of the twenty-first century’ (Ryan and Hall, 2001:13).

### **The Gendered (Sex) Tourist Gaze**

The ways in which (gendered) tourists consume particular spaces/places through particular modes reveals something about the nature of host/guest interactions. Tourism literature acknowledges that travelers (both male and female) are often situated as visual consumers, as powerful watchers of the different/exotic Other (Urry, 2002; Shellhorn and Perkins, 2004; Maoz, 2005). Chi (1997) suggests that tourism is the scopophilia of modern consciousness, with the ‘eye’/seeing taking precedence over other forms of touristic understanding. When people are on holiday they often ‘look at the environment with interest and curiosity...we gaze at what we encounter’; the gaze is both socially organized and systematized (Urry, 2002:1). Indeed, part of being a modern day tourist means that one gazes upon a variety of scenes, people, and places that are ‘out of the ordinary’(Urry, 2002: 1). The gaze focuses on local features that are marked off as unusual, or different to everyday, quotidian encounters and revolves around the collection of signs and symbols. Tourists often search for the authentic or the real as part of their travels and they (visually) consume these authentic scenes with the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002).

Indeed, sexualized shows and venues in Thailand are designed specifically to draw the tourist gaze and Wilson (2004), writing about a notorious sexual area in Bangkok, notes that the architectural and spatial orientation is configured to elicit the customer’s gaze:

This infrastructure of seating and lighting maximizes the customer’s view of an array of women and directs the gaze away from customers as a whole...Bars sell spectacle and fantasy, affection and flattery, and access to an array of available young women.

They do not “sell” the sexual services of women in the way a massage parlor or brothel does. They sell drinks and access to women who are available to sell their time and services (Wilson, 2004: 79).

Importantly, Wilson points out that the sale of drinks is the primary source of income for many sexualized venues: ‘Most bar profit comes from selling drinks, which in turn relies on the provision of erotic entertainment, companionship, and the number of women to choose from. It is the women workers- the spectacle- who attract spectators and transform them into consumers’ (2004:79-80). These visual engagements with tourist spaces and objects are often gendered, and Wolff (1985) discusses the way the gaze is constructed within cultural geography and argues that women in public spaces are objects of (men’s) attention and cannot escape the male gaze. As such, women are not generally able to actively look or watch others, nor can they actively gaze.

Various psychoanalytic and cultural theorists have argued about the nature of the female gaze and focused on the gendered nature of sexuality and perversion (Kaplan, 1991; Wellton, 1992). Psychiatric understandings of voyeurism and scopophilia have largely positioned men as active watchers and women as passive objects of the gaze (Stoller, 1986; Kaplan, 1991; Pajackowska, 2000). These interpretations of women’s ability to visually consume tourist sites/sights, their appropriation of a gaze that would normally be seen as masculine, and their ability to visually consume sexual tourist sites perhaps demonstrates the power they can locate within the particular space of travel.

Understandings of sex tourism (for both men and women) often focus on the physical nature of the sexual interactions between a ‘couple’, i.e. a sex tourist and a local sex worker. However, defining sex tourism as the consummation of ‘commercial sexual relations’ is problematic and further ‘...is an overt simplification and arguably excludes many other cases and settings’ (Oppermann, 1999: 252). Indeed, this thesis will provide a more nuanced

understanding of the various ways that sex tourist behavior can be understood, and women's visual engagement with the sex industry will be a key focus. The role of visual interactions within sexual spaces/places have begun to be acknowledged (Opperman, 1998; Suren and Steifvater, 1998; Oppermann, 1999; Ryan and Martin, 2001; Johnston, 2001; Wonders and Michalowski, 2001; Johnston, 2002) as has the importance of the tourist process in the situating of sex tourism: 'sex tourism masks the complex processes by which individuals choose to seek sexual gratification, first within prostitution, and *secondly as part of the tourist experience*' (Kruhse MountBurton in Oppermann, 1999:252, emphasis added). The role of the visual in tourist and sex tourist processes is a key element that shapes touristic engagement with both sexual spaces/places and with eroticized/exoticized Others. As Oppermann points out: 'many red light districts around the world constitute major attractions for tourists who do not pay for sexual services, but rather visit those places for voyeuristic purposes' (Oppermann, 1999:252).

A few authors have started to explore western women's experiences of/in sexualized tourist destinations. Oppermann notes that western women engage in voyeuristic behaviors in Thailand, suggesting they visit go-go bars 'in a voyeuristic role observing male sex tourist behavior' (Oppermann, 1999:254). Manderson also highlights the particular problem of tourist voyeurism in the Thai sex industry noting that 'the voyeur is a consumer catered for within the context of the [Thai sex industry]... Whether or not the commoditization shifts from voyeurism to active sex, sex remains the commodity, and the bar a commercial venue for the sale of sex' (Manderson, 1995:314). This emphasis on the *tourist experience* and *voyeurism* as part of sex tourism is important as it moves away from a narrow classification of sex tourism as related to prostitute use and allows for a broader discussion about sex tourism as the commodification of Other/exotic/erotic people and bodies. Importantly, the boundaries between 'normal' tourism and 'sexual' tourism become more blurred as visual and touristic processes are considered (Bishop and Robinson, 1998). Sexuality (or perhaps what is assumed to be Thai sexuality) becomes commodified as part of both tourism and sex

tourism encounters; Thai sex workers become the commodified objects of a touristic/lascivious gaze although *not*, in this case, a solely male gaze.

The tourist gaze is guided and marked for tourist consumers by a variety of sources, including film, television, music, and in particular, guidebooks (Jacobs, 2001; Crouch, 2002). Tourist guides and tourist professionals have an impact on the direction of the gaze and particular objects are highlighted by the tourist industry as suitable for tourists to gaze upon (Urry, 2002). As well, changing values associated with class, gender, and distinction of taste can have an impact on what is marked out (by the tourist industry) as culturally relevant, and as such what objects are fit for visual consumption. What counts as a suitable object of the (tourist) gaze can be almost anything, but their essential feature is that, whatever this object is, it must be different to the normal objects from home; it must be out of the ordinary (Urry, 2002:12). In short, this thesis will argue that Thai sex workers become suitable objects for the tourist gaze because they are seen as signs/symbols of real Thailand, and because they are suitable different, in fact, suitable Other.

### **Western Women: The Missing Consumers of the Thai Sex Industry**

Lanfant (1995) maintains that spaces/places are not fixed, but operate within a changing global identification process; as such, Thailand is not simply a 'place', it is inferred with specific meanings and context as it becomes known as a 'tourist destination', and within that, a 'sex tourist destination'. The sex tourist market in Thailand is uniquely positioned, and the history and social contexts that have helped develop Thailand as a tourist destination have also worked to develop Thailand as a sex tourist destination (Truong, 1990; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Boonchalaski and Guest, 1998; Wilson, 2004). Thailand's red light areas host a wide range of sexual entertainments, which include male, female, and transsexual sex workers, employed at a wide variety of venues/shows, bars/nightclubs/cabarets, and massage parlors.

There is a need to explore gendered practices of tourism in Thailand, particularly with reference to women's engagements with and understandings of sex tourism. Exploring the ways in which women tourists understand sex tourism, and how sex tourism as a social phenomenon might impact their tourist behaviors has been investigated in some of the debates on sexual tourism in Thailand, but requires a more thorough analysis. .

The gendered positioning of tourism in Thailand, so often focused on the behaviors of male tourists, misses out the critical position of western women in these touristic spaces. Manderson's (1992) work highlights the sexual/voyeuristic motivation in tourists' desires to see ping pong shows in Thailand, and she works to situate these shows as an integral part of the broader sex industry. Manderson herself visited a ping pong show to observe the interactions of male customers with Thai female sex workers and suggests throughout the article, 'Public Sex Performances in Patpong and Explorations of the Edges of Imagination', that the Thai female dancers are objects of lust for these voyeuristic male clients. She notes that: 'Thai women perform for and act out the presumed fantasies of foreign men' (1992: 454) and further claims that 'the imagery of the shows, of the bars are created by and for men' (1992: 465). Manderson acknowledges that female tourists are also present at the show (as is she herself) but insists that the shows are designed exclusively for male tourists. While this claim is still possible, the fact that women are visiting ping pong shows, and that their presence there is acknowledged but not analyzed calls for further reflection about processes of tourism more generally and a reevaluation of the role of women in (sexual) tourism settings.

As this thesis will show, western women are present in go-go bars, red light areas, and ping pong shows in Thailand, and part of the aim here will be to unravel some of the reasons why western women might be accessing these sexualized spaces. By recognizing women's presence in these spaces, and by expanding the definition of sex tourism out from simply direct sexual contact to visual consumption, it might be possible to work through some of the

issues related to the role of western women in (sexual) tourism, and specifically understand the importance of not only gender, but also raced/classed/national identity in these dynamics.

### **The Realities of the Sex Industry**

It is useful to take a moment to mention here that some popular and touristic discourses on Thailand have presented the sex industry as innocuous, suggesting that there are little or no negative consequences for sex workers. Indeed, this thesis hangs heavily upon the idea that touristic discourses on the Thai sex industry render the sex industry as unproblematic and that tourists' visual encounters with these spaces are also understood as relatively innocuous. However, the reality of the Thai sex industry is grim for many of the people working in this black market economy, which works against discourses that suggest the sex industry in Thailand is problem-free. It is worth briefly highlighting some of these problems here, as the rest of this thesis will draw on the assumption that Thai women working in the sex industry are often vulnerable, and prone to exploitative practices

### **Legal and Human Rights Issues**

Tourism has long been an important industry in Southeast Asia (Wood, 1980; Truong, 1990) and is still a critical source of income for Thailand, with tourism receipts over recent years averaging at about 16 billion USD (Euromonitor, 2009). The sex industry is also a stronghold of the Thai economy, with the sex industry in Thailand worth an estimated 100 billion baht (c. 3 billion USD) (Hutasingh, 2003). Both of these industries work in tandem, and they are mutually reinforcing. However, the sex industry in Thailand is illegal, and most sexualized venues operate within a corrupt black market economy, where politicians are open to bribes (The Nation, 2004) and police have sex with prostitutes as a 'fringe benefit', being able to sleep with sex workers as a means of gathering evidence to arrest them (Lilakul, 2003).

Because sex work operates at the legal fringes of society, sex workers miss out on benefits that other formalized workers can take advantage of. Sex work establishments are not able to register their workers with government schemes that would ensure them basic health care and social security that 'legitimate' workers in Thailand are entitled to receive (Charoenpo, 2004). Sex workers receive 'inadequate labour protection, if any at all' (Hutasingh, 2003: no page number), and many of them have little awareness of their legal rights (Lilakul, 2003).

It is not just Thai women who face these issues; women from ethnic minority groups (e.g. from the Shan Tribes located in Thailand and Burma) who work in the sex industry are often victims of gross human rights abuses due to their marginal status (Beyrer, 2001) as are migrant sex workers coming from poor neighboring countries (Laos, China, Cambodia) who are afforded even fewer rights (Bangchang, 1981; Charoenpo, 2004). Further, if sex workers or their families are illegal migrants in Thailand their position is usually more untenable given the fragile nature of their legal status and the exploitative practices that can be enacted by brothel owners and Thai police (Skrobankek et al, 1997; Phongpaichit, 1980; 1993).

Children and adolescents involved in the sex industry are particularly at risk of exploitation (O'Briain, 2008) and recent campaigns from NGOs such as ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children) have highlighted problems associated with child sex tourism in Thailand (ECPAT, undated).

### **Sex Work and Social Stigma**

Rural Thai women often have poor access to decent education, and alternative employment options for poorly educated women from rural areas can be limited (Manopaiboon et al, 2003) and many women work in the sex industry because the sex industry offers a form of higher paid work than would normally be available to many of these women (Boonchalaski and

Guest, 1998). Some women are debt-bonded or controlled by ‘pimps’ or brothel owners which places them in a fragile situation:

Prostitutes may be constrained to their place of work by debt-bonds typically payable by the prostitute’s family. Actual payment of debt can be subject to manipulation by deceitful brothel owners’ (Booranapim and Mainwaring, 2002:767).

Many women also face pressure from religious structure and familial relations to fulfill a filial and fiscal responsibility to look after their parents, which may result in women opting into prostitution as a result of pressure from these outside influences (Truong, 1990; Skrobanek et al, 1997; Booranapim and Mainwaring, 2002). The economic drive to participate in sex work for some women included ‘a sense of obligation to their families, a need for repaying loans, a desire to purchase more material goods, and a plan to save money for alternative work’ (Manopaiboon et al, 2003: 42).

Sex workers often face social stigma as a result of their work in the sex industry, and women who want to exit prostitution to return to ‘normal’ life may find it difficult to marry or be fully accepted into Thai society (Peracca et al, 1998). In Thailand, a predominately Buddhist country, prostitutes are generally understood to be ‘losing merit’ as a result of their sexual occupation, and this can also negatively impact the way they are seen in Thai society (Truong, 1990; Peracca et al, 1998). However, fulfilling one’s filial responsibility to look after one’s family or parents is an important idea stemming from Buddhist thought, and a daughter’s ability to financially support her parents, even if it means working in the sex industry, can be a way of attaining merit (Maticka-Tyndale et al, 1997), and in some cases can win sex workers an elevated social status (Truong, 1990; Peracca et al, 1998).

Furthermore, the divide between markets - sexual/non-sexual, market/black market - creates a tension in Thai society, as the borders that define and delimit legitimate/illegitimate modes of

behavior are often based on cultural and social constructions, and sex workers often bear the brunt of this public border anxiety (Wilson, 2004)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Health Risks**

Sex workers of all nationalities are also at risk of sexually transmitted infections. The rise of HIV/AIDS amongst sex workers in Thailand ‘coincided with an increase in the economic importance of international tourism by the mid-1980s’ (Cohen, 1988:468), and there was a reluctance from the Thai government to speak frankly about infection rates or prevention strategies as they did not want to harm the tourism sector. Public health authorities did little to warn sex workers about the dangers of unprotected sex (Cohen, 1988) and so put many women working in the sex industry at risk. Steinfatt (2002) suggests that in the late 1990s, AIDS rates had already reached epidemic proportions in Thailand. In 1998, according to the United Nations, Thailand was one of three countries in Asia where the mortality rate of AIDS victims was high enough to necessitate a reconsideration of future population projects (Steinfatt, 2002).

While rates of infection have dropped dramatically since the 1990s, HIV/AIDS continues to be a problem in Thailand. Booranapim and Mainwaring (2002) suggest that HIV/AIDS is still a particular risk for women working in the sex industry in Thailand and female sex workers are at particular risk when it comes to contracting the virus (VanLandingham et al, 1993; Peracca et al, 1998; Booranapim and Mainwaring, 2002; Steinfatt, 2002; Manopaiboon et al, 2003). AVERT is an international AIDS charity that provides statistical data on HIV/AIDS infection rates across the world. They suggest that while rates of HIV/AIDS in Thailand have

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter Three will point to the historical and social processes that have helped to establish a large scale international sex industry in Thailand, but it is important to remember that the capitalist project in Thailand has depended on the labor of women, whether they be sex workers, factory workers, tourist agents, etc (Truong, 1990; Wilson, 2004).

declined in recent years, the rates of infection in Thailand are still the highest in the region, and sex workers and their partners face particular risk of infection:

After peaking at around 140,000 cases in 1991, the number of new HIV infections in Thailand declined to an estimated 21,000 in 2003. This dramatic fall was mainly due to increased condom use by men and a reduction in their use of brothels. However, there is mounting evidence that HIV is now spreading largely among the spouses and partners of clients of sex workers, and among injecting drug users. HIV prevalence in Thailand remains the highest in the region (AVERT, 2010).

Sex workers, particularly female sex workers, have often been seen as a problem group for the spread of the disease, and can face further stigmatization as a result of this (Cohen, 1988).

### **The Element of Choice**

Many authors have pointed to this important element of choice (Truong, 1990; Lim, 1998; Phongpaichit et al, 1998) and suggest Thai women may choose to enter the sex industry for a variety of different reasons; their ability to negotiate their involvement with the sex industry hinges upon a wide variety of factors. Some of Thai sex workers have found it difficult to leave the sex industry, despite expressing a desire to do so. However, many also felt that working in the sex industry was a choice, often based on economic or social necessities, and many suggested they did not feel traumatized by their work (Manopaiboon et al, 2003).

The aim of this thesis is not to suggest that all sex workers are victims, or that they are *necessarily* violating their human rights by engaging in sex work as some radical feminists would suggest (Barry, 1996; Jeffreys, 2003). Rather, the point that I am making here is that regardless of the agency of those involved in the sex industry, there are risks and problems associated with working in this particular area, and that nature of the sex industry in Thailand

puts sex workers in a position where they may experience certain risks and be exposed to certain harms. I maintain that women can and do choose to enter the sex industry, and that this can be an active and informed choice. However, the way that the sex industry operates in Thailand leaves all sex workers (male, female, and transgendered) vulnerable to exploitative practices<sup>6</sup>.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

My ethnographic work in Thailand, which included observations, surveys, and interview data, suggest that there are women tourists who do access a variety of sexualized spaces as part of their holiday experience. Data collected in four tourist cities in Thailand suggest that many female tourists see the sex industry as a normal part of Thai culture. Women's interactions with these spaces, founded on a visual engagement with various sexualized markets, works against the notion that sex tourist spaces are reserved for male tourists, and the data opens up debates about the nature of sex tourism and the role of race and gender in tourism structures and practices. This thesis will work to highlight the overlap between tourist and sex tourist markets, as women's tourism experiences of sexualized venues are explored.

Using an ethnographic approach to study the behaviors of western women tourists in the sexual spaces of Thailand, this research sought to explore women's understandings of these areas, as well as examining their position within the sex tourism equation as female tourists' interactions with various sexual markets in Thailand were mapped and deconstructed. Chapter Two will look at the research design and methodology used for this project, and provide an important foundational element for the rest of the thesis as the sexualized research sites are described and defined.

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of children selling sex cannot be ignored here. It is important to note that children selling sex face very different issues to adults selling sex, and issues of consent, power, and exploitation need to be reexamined in this context. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the complex issues associated with this type of activity.

Chapter Three aims to explore the historical and social contexts of the Thai sex industry, to see how prostitution has been understood in Thailand before the arrival of mass western tourism, how the arrival of tourists in Thailand changed the size and scale of the sex industry, and how tourism policy in Thailand shaped tourism/sex tourism practices. I will argue that these social and historical understandings of the sex industry have impacted upon the way Thailand is seen by the western world, and the tourist mythology surrounding Thailand highlights the sexual nature of the destination. This can be seen in popular cultural representations of Thailand (in films, novels, and television shows) and in the tourism literature on Thailand that western tourists would have access to (guidebooks, cultural guides, and local guide magazines). The sex industry is simultaneously presented to tourists as an authentic part of Thai culture, and an exciting tourist experience. Chapter Three will put forward these questions:

- How has the sex tourist industry become entrenched in Thailand?
- How are the sexualized discourses around Thailand sustained and promoted by the tourist industry?

Chapter Four highlights some theoretical debates around the nature of authenticity and the nature of tourism identity formations. This chapter presents empirical data (observations, interviews, and survey material) that situates the constructed nature of women's tourism experiences and details the importance that they attach to accessing what they understand to be part of real Thailand. The data suggests that their desire to participate in authentic, exciting, and risky tourism practices enables their entrée into sexual tourism sites. Some women use their experiences in these spaces and places to accrue a particular type of social/cultural capital that positions them as experienced travelers who are knowledgeable about Thai 'cultural' (sexual) practices. Chapter Four will examine these research questions:

- Do western women tourists interact with and consume the sex industry?
- How do they understand and makes sense of these interactions?

Chapter Five suggests that women's engagements with the Others they encounter in these spaces is based on an ambivalent position that impacts upon western women's understandings of these sexual encounters. Empirical data will be presented that suggest western women often visit the sex industry in groups - with friends, partners, or family members. This group interaction helps to cement the idea that these engagements with various forms of sexual entertainment are passive and visual. Their construction of the tourist experience denies the sexual nature of these spaces and venues; seeing these shows as part of a tourist experience is 'ok', but those who participate in these shows outside of these boundaries (i.e. the 'real sex tourists') are seen as disgusting or horrible. This creates a natural division between what is acceptable/unacceptable in these situations, and those that deviate from the passive/acceptable option are castigated. As well, the Thai Others western women come into contact with are understood simultaneously as sexual/aggressive and passive/victims. The Others who occupy these sexual spaces must be carefully managed by western women, as their understanding of their own identity is created *in opposition* to the sex tourists and the sex workers that they encounter. Chapter Five asks the questions:

- How do western women understand their presence at the shows in relation to other tourists who also occupy these spaces?
- How do western women position themselves in relation to the Thai sex workers they encounter?

Chapter Six will explore the inconsistencies that are highlighted in women's interviews in more detail, as I argue that this division women create between 'us' and 'them' is artificial; women's visual engagement with the sex industry, rather than being innocent or passive, has

the potential to be sadistic and exploitative. In this chapter I will show how western women understand themselves in relation to the Thai Other, to suggest that a hierarchical division is created by women's visual interactions in sexual spaces, where Thai sex workers are seen as lesser, as objects, as Other. This chapter combines empirical data with psychoanalytic theories to highlight how voyeurism can function as a sadistic mechanism, and will draw on post-colonial and film theory to highlight the ways in which women's experiences with Thai Others are predicated upon a prejudiced understanding of the exotic/erotic women they visually consume. Chapter Six will pose the questions:

- Are women's visual interactions with the sex industry really passive?
- How does power operate in their visual consumption of the Other?

In Chapter Seven I will draw on the information highlighted in Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six to link back to the theoretical 'problems' that I presented here. This thesis will ultimately argue that western women tourists do interact with sexualized spaces as part of their tourist experience, and that these visual interactions are not passive or innocent, but are predicated upon a complex set of power relations where women understand themselves in opposition to the sexualized Others they encounter. Chapter Seven will conclude the thesis by trying to answer the question:

- What are the implications of women's interactions with the sex industry in Thailand for theoretical understandings of the gendered practices of tourism/sex tourism?

## **Chapter Two: Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This thesis aims to explore western women tourists' interactions with the Thai sex industry. I spent a number of months researching in Thailand, as I attempted to observe and capture the tourist experiences of women traveling in Thai tourist cities. I endeavored to accurately reflect what was happening in the field, and my time in Thailand collecting data was critically important for understanding the ways tourist spaces in Thailand were being both imagined and explored by western travelers.

In this chapter, I will explore the epistemological underpinnings of the research and explain my rationale for the research design and approach. This PhD research project employed an ethnographic approach, trying to understand the ways in which western female tourists understand and engage with sexual spaces and places in four tourist cities. Conducting a tourist-focus ethnography raised a number of methodological challenges, and brought with it specific ethical dilemmas, some of which are pertinent to any ethnographic research project, and some more specific to tourism-centered research. These challenges will be highlighted and some of the practical solutions that were used during the fieldwork to try to address these issues will be presented.

This chapter begins by discussing the use of ethnographic methods, and how these methods were applied to a social science project focusing on tourism practices. Following this, the specific fieldwork locations and the types of venues that this research investigated will be presented. These introductory sections provide an important methodological overview, and make it possible to then discuss the sampling strategy and the research methods used during this ethnographic project (observations, surveys, informal conversations/interviews, and formal interviews). Ethical issues will also be discussed in this chapter, and some of the

specific problems that were encountered during the research process (ethical, practical, emotional) will be addressed here.

### **Conducting Ethnography**

This PhD research project employed an ethnographic approach to study the behaviors of western tourists in a tourist setting, focusing particularly on western women tourists. Ethnography may be defined as ‘the data of cultural anthropology that are derived from direct observation of behaviour... The making, reporting, and evaluation of these observations is the task of the ethnographer’ (Burgess, 1984:2). Traditional ethnographic studies, based on anthropological research traditions, have largely been concerned with observing the behaviors of and getting close to Other people and cultures (Burgess, 1984; Silverman, 1985). However, the focus of more contemporary ethnographies have shifted as they have expanded, with ethnographic research practices understood as ‘any research involving observations of events and actions in natural contexts, and which acknowledges the mutual dependence of theory and data’ (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000:45). Social science research has adopted the tools of ethnography to allow for a modification of the research method; undertaking ethnographic research within the social sciences requires the ethnographer to engage in a discourse with the people being studied, as we attempt to understand not just what is going on at the surface, but try to penetrate beneath surface meanings. In this sense ethnography is about exploring people in their culture, sifting through the contexts and ambiguities that exist there: ‘As inter-worked systems of construable signs... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly - that is, thickly-described (Geertz, 1973:14). It is this ‘thick description’ that ethnographers seek to find (Geertz, 1973).

Tourism studies have often drawn on anthropological and ethnographic research traditions to inform methodologies used (Griffin et al, 1982; Graburn, 1983; Graburn and Moore, 1994;

Veal, 2006, Brennan, 2004; Frohlick and Harrison, 2008). Ethnographies of tourism, like traditional ethnographic research projects, observe the behaviors of a specific group of people in a specific context, trying to understand the world from their perspective. However, ethnographic research in tourism differs from traditional ethnographic research in that the target population is not a group of Other people in their home environment, but rather tourists interacting in Other spaces and places. The role of the tourist ethnographer is to study tourists in situ in particular destinations/areas to understand the nature of the tourist experience in this Other space/place. Ethnographic methods were used for this research as a way to explore female tourists' interactions with sexual spaces in Thailand and to try to understand these engagements from their perspective.

Within tourism ethnography, the researcher and the participants can be joined together and interact in different ways, within what Seaton (2002) would describe as either a 'closed field' or an 'open field' context. While the open field context employs a more distanced approach - with the researcher standing apart from the tourists and observing from an outside position - Seaton argues that in the closed field, the researcher and participants are joined together in a discrete and spatially confined social setting 'as co-actors in a drama whose bounds are set by the span of the events in which they are participating' (Seaton, 2002:312). In the open field, contributors in the research sphere 'are not united within a common spatial and temporal field, but exist as separate and independent actors, within parallel, through partly overlapping rather than identical time and spatial fields' (Seaton, 2002:312). Within the closed field context, a tourist researcher might be a member of a traveling party, or more generally could be considered a tourist amongst other tourists: 'The researcher is also likely to share cultural attributes with at least some of the party (language, nationality)' and generally Seaton argues that in this circumstance '...the researcher is perceived as a peer' (2002:313) of the other group members. As my participants were western women, I was often seen as a peer and shared many of the characteristics of the group I was researching. In this sense the research occurred in a 'closed field' context to some extent. That being said, there were times when I

also stood apart from other tourists in Thailand and observed from a distance, but generally speaking I was more a part of the tourist scene that distanced from and apart from it.

Whilst traditional ethnographies have often focused on ‘natives’ or local communities, this ethnographic project is different in that it studied a group of people who are not acting in their normal or everyday environment. So this research project took on aspects of a traditional ethnography in the sense that it required me as a researcher to immerse myself in a culture that was not my own - but equally does not belong to my participants in the normal sense either. My ethnography centered on gaining access to female tourists, and part of the process was immersing myself in touristic spaces/practices as well exploring the sexualized areas female tourists might explore. This immersion process is central to the ethnographic process:

Ethnographers are committed to going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people. “Getting close” minimally requires physical and social proximity to the daily rounds of people’s lives and activities; the field researcher must be able to take up positions in the midst of the key sites and scenes of other’s lives in order to observe and understand them. But getting close has another, far more significant component: The ethnographer seeks a deeper *immersion* in others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. With immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so. In this way immersion gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others’ lives and enhances his sensitivity to interaction and process’ (Emerson et al, 1995:1-2 emphasis added).

Part of this immersion process entailed participating in normal tourist activities, and going to places where tourists spend time, whether it be beaches and cafes or ping pong shows and go-go bars.

While ethnography has been a useful means of acquiring information and data about tourists and tourist behaviors (Frohlick and Harrison, 2008), utilizing ethnography in a rather untraditional way presents a number of problems for the research process. Traditionally, ethnographic researchers have been ‘committed to going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people’ (Emerson et al, 1995:1). These Other people were often rooted in particular places, and the job of the anthropologist was to seek out these Other groups in the spaces they inhabited. While tourism-focused ethnography also strives to get close to the activities and experiences of a group of people, these people are not grounded Others but rather tourists in the field, an amorphous and diverse group that present their own set of research difficulties:

Tourists number in the millions; never all gather in one place; generally do not stay anywhere for extended periods; have varied national identities, socioeconomic class positions, ages, genders, sexualities, racial and ethnic identifications, professions and work lives. Additionally each has a unique personal history, and a life outside of the time they spend as a tourist. No matter how they define themselves, or understand their own motivations for travel, or how they might be categorized by others – traveler, tourist, wanderer, cottager, adventurer, eco- or cultural, romance/sex tourist, student or even ‘not-a-tourist’; or how their travels might be described – long haul, cruise, independent, guided, episodic, seasonal, frivolous, rest and relaxation, they are a complex, dispersed and highly mobile population (Frohlick and Harrison, 2008: 5).

Bearing these difficulties in mind, and understanding that women would occupy different positions within the research space, I worked with and tried to shape the ethnographic process to encompass these difficulties, while at the same time exploring the commonalities that existed between western women and their experiences with the sex industry.

The aim of my research was to understand the ways women interacted with particular (sexualized) spaces in Thailand by closely observing female tourists, which often meant participating in activities they engaged in, and visiting the places they visited. This often meant spending time in sexualized venues/areas in order to both observe the behavior of female tourists, but additionally spending time with tourists in tourist spaces/places helped to understand how women tourists constructed their experiences with the sex industry as I watched and spoke with them, but also as I myself participated in the same activities.

### **Setting the Scene: Fieldwork Locations and Sexualized Venues**

This section will try to set out the particular places and spaces that were the focus of the research. Understanding the specific contexts of the various tourist settings that were researched is important, as each city, each zone, each venue reveals something of the nature of the (sexual) tourist experience in Thailand. Each of the tourist cities offers its own particular context, and this section will describe not only the particular streets or zones that were researched, but also the various types of venues that were accessed during the research. Giving an overview of the research sites helps to set the scene as it gives details of the sexualized nature of each city, and also gives an idea of why particular areas were chosen for investigation over others.

#### **Fieldwork Locations**

*Pattaya and Phuket*

Statistics from the official Tourism Authority in Thailand suggest that there have been relatively equal numbers of 'European', 'North American' and 'Oceanic' women entering Thailand from 2001-2006 (TAT, 2007). However, there is no detailed data on where in Thailand women travelers visit. As such, deciding which cities would be the best place to study female tourists interactions with the sex industry was not immediately obvious. However, some kind of decision had to be made about where the research would initially focus, although further considerations were taken into account once I was in the field and had a better insight into the tourist landscape. Two cities were chosen prior to the initial fieldwork trip, Pattaya and Phuket; I chose these cities for a number of reasons. Having been to Thailand for a previous research trip, I was aware of the tourist environments in Phuket and Pattaya. Both locations are beach resort areas and both receive large numbers of tourist visitors, with statistics from the Tourist Authority of Thailand putting the number of tourist arrivals to Pattaya in 2007 at over 4.48 million people, an increase of nearly 10% from the previous year (Tatnews, 2010). Phuket hosted 3.28 million international tourists in 2007, which suggests an increase of nearly 14% from the previous year (Tatnews, 2010). Although Phuket and Pattaya were situated slightly differently within the tourist market, with Phuket more expensive and considered more 'up-market' compared to Pattaya, both destinations were attractive to international tourists, and both sites featured a visible sex tourism industry.

Indeed, Pattaya was chosen in particular for its infamous and notorious sex tourist trade; the sex industry in Pattaya is so pervasive that it would be difficult for any tourist, male or female, not to encounter it on some level during a stay there. For this reason, I hypothesized that many female tourists staying in this area would be aware of the sex industry and might be able to speak about their experiences/interactions with such a highly visible and highly sexual space oriented around sex tourism.

Geographically Pattaya is located roughly 100 miles from Bangkok on the southeast coast of Thailand, near to Si Racha (see image 2.1).

**Image 2.1**



Source: CIA World Factbook

The city of Pattaya is infamous for its sex tourist industry; as one of the first rest and relaxation (R&R) sites used by US soldiers in the 1960's, Pattaya's historical link with prostitution and the sex industry has continued and its reputation as a sex tourist site is well known. There is a large expatriate community in Pattaya, with a considerable number of English and German bars/pubs that cater to (male) sex tourists. The area attracts large

numbers of male tourists who visit various sexualized bars/venues<sup>7</sup> and *The Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand* describes Pattaya as a 'sex tourist hub' (Williams et al, 2007:232) and also 'lacking in culture and good taste' (Cummings, 1997: 356). The research site was chosen to understand how women negotiate their experiences in a holiday destination that is dominated by a large and highly visible commercial sex industry.

As Pattaya itself is a relatively small city with a high concentration of tourist/sex tourist sites in the southern area of the city, there was little difficulty in defining the research sites within the tourist zone. There are a number of districts that feature a 'red light' area in Pattaya, all located quite close together. The main areas that became the focus of this study were Walking Street and Boyztown.

Walking Street in Pattaya is a mile long stretch that becomes pedestrianized in the evening and features a large number of sexualized shows and bars that line the road and the adjoining alleyways; during the day the street is empty of tourists and sex workers, but from sunset Walking Street is closed off to cars in order to allow tourists to walk and look at lady boys and go-go dancers, uninhibited by vehicular traffic. This is a popular (sex) tourist area that is written about extensively in mainstream guidebooks.

Boyztown is one of the gay areas in Pattaya which is described in many tourist guides; it occupies a small L-shaped street slightly off from the main beach road. Due to its smaller size and more discrete location, Boyztown does not have as many passing tourists walking by and looking in the same way as they might in Walking Street. However, many people still walked

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<sup>7</sup> Previous research that I conducted in Pattaya evidenced the large number of male tourists and expatriates who frequent the go-go bars and clubs in central and south Pattaya.

through or came for a drink or a show and there are a number of organized tours for Chinese and Korean tourists (male and female) that walk/look down this street on a nightly basis<sup>8</sup>.

Both Walking Street and Boyztown have bars and clubs that line both sides of the street, with many open air bars and pubs where dancing sex workers (female and male respectively) may be visible; the more risqué ‘shows’ are usually hidden behind a curtain and obscured from the tourists’ gaze. Touts, female sex workers, male sex workers, and *katheoy* sex workers line the streets and interact with tourists who pass along, trying to entice people into the shows or posing for photographs with the tourists (tourists are expected to pay sex workers for having their photo taken with them).

Phuket is a good distance away from both Pattaya, an island on the southwest peninsula of Thailand, about 400 miles south of Bangkok (see Image 2.2). Phuket was chosen because anecdotal evidence from other researchers in Thailand had suggested that western female tourists were perhaps engaging in sexual encounters with local men, and there has been evidence to suggest that some Japanese women in Phuket have sexual interactions with local ‘beach boys’ during their visit to the island (Vorakitphokatorn et al, 1994). Additionally, Phuket also had a large and well-known sex tourist trade, where again I felt that women tourists were more likely to come into contact with sexualized spaces than they might in other tourist locations.

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<sup>8</sup> There were no organized western walking tours of this area, although many guidebooks and hotels provide tourists with information about where they might want to walk to see ‘real’ Pattaya, and Walking Street and Boyztown are almost always included as top sights/sites.



**Image 2.2**  
Source: CIA World Factbook



**Image 2.3**  
Source: CIA World Factbook

There are a number of small beach enclaves that make up Phuket Island (see Image 2.3). While the sex industry exists and thrives in the smaller areas of Phuket, Patong is one of the most popular beaches and is also the main touristic centre for nightlife/sexual entertainment; as such Patong was the main area of focus for this study.

In Patong there is one central pedestrianized street around which much of the evening entertainment is focused- Bangla Road. Bangla Road is somewhat similar to Walking Street

in that it is a road about a mile long that has a good proportion of bars and shows arranged along the sides and down the alleyways off the main thoroughfare. There are a larger proportion of bars and nightclubs in the area that purport to have less commercial sexual encounters (although this is a questionable claim) whereas Walking Street and Boyztown are generally much more obviously focused on prostitution and sexually oriented shows. Bangla Road is the place where most of the evening entertainment happens and tourists from other smaller beaches nearby will often come to this area for nighttime entertainment. Like Walking Street, Bangla Road features touts and sex workers interacting with passersby and (potential) customers on the street.

### *Chiang Mai and Bangkok*

As the research unfolded, I eventually decided to include both Chiang Mai and Bangkok as additional research sites. In the case of Bangkok, this was because many women had spoken about their encounters with the sex industry around Patpong (a famous night market and sex tourist area in central Bangkok) and highlighted this as a key (sex) tourist area they had knowledge of. Chiang Mai was also mentioned by many tourists, but in the sense that Chiang Mai was seen as a cultural foil to the sexual entertainment on offer in Bangkok, Pattaya, or Phuket. When women spoke about Chiang Mai it was often to offer it as the antithesis to the sexualized zones and sexual activities on offer elsewhere. For both Chiang Mai and Bangkok, their inclusion was based on women's reference to them as important tourist spaces and places within their travel narratives.

Bangkok is the capital city of Thailand, centrally located in Thailand (see Image 2.4)



**Image 2.4**

Source: CIA World Factbook

Bangkok is a busy, noisy, sprawling urban city, with a large number of areas in the city where tourists would stay/visit during their trip. Almost all major air, rail, and ground transportation originates or terminates in Bangkok. This means that tourists entering Thailand on an international flight will often arrive into Bangkok, and Bangkok serves as a transit hub for tourists traveling between locations within Thailand. Unlike Pattaya and Phuket, the large scale of the city meant that the research site had to be more narrowly defined, and particular streets were singled out as key research zones.

Within Bangkok there are several well-known and highly frequented sex tourist areas, the most famous of which are Patpong, Soi Cowboy, and the Nana Entertainment Plaza. All are centrally located and easily accessible to tourists. Observations were conducted in all three areas, but Patpong was eventually chosen as the main research site for a number of reasons. Patpong is the most renowned of the three sites, very well referenced in most of the mainstream guidebooks to Thailand (more details on this can be found in Chapter Three) and very popular with tourists. It was also the area that the vast majority of female tourists that I spoke to knew about or had visited. Patpong has a thriving night market where tourist paraphernalia and knock-off luxury items are sold next to the throbbing strobe lights and disco music that emanates from the sexual clubs that line the market streets. The Patpong area is always busy with tourists passing by, browsing the stalls, or stopping into the sex shows; this melee of tourists made it easy to conduct observations relatively unobtrusively.

In Patpong the bars and shows line the streets (*sois*), with the market located in the middle. There are a number of *sois* that encompass the red light area and the market extends to the main road as well. As the streets are densely packed and bars are physically near to the market stalls, tourists can see into the various bars and clubs that line their passage so as a pedestrian it is possible to see female sex workers dressed in lingerie or bikinis dancing on stages or sitting with customers while looking at fake rolex watches and tourist gifts at the same time. The more risqué shows are usually located upstairs or away from the main streets so peering in to have a look at these shows is usually not possible from the road or market area.

Chiang Mai seems almost the antithesis to Bangkok, a mid-size town in the North of Thailand in the Chiang Mai Province (see image 2.5)



**Image 2.5**

Source: CIA World Factbook

Chiang Mai is situated as a cultural hub for tourists, and is also gateway to the northern Hills and the Golden Triangle. The tourist-oriented sex industry in Chiang Mai is much smaller than in any of the other tourist cities covered. However, there is still a thriving sex industry located in smaller bars near the popular night market in the Ta Pae Gate area. The bars in this area might be considered more discreet than bars in Patpong or Walking Street as there are few touts or sex workers enticing customers into venues and there is only one venue offering a nightly ping pong show. However, there are other sexual venues in locations slightly further

out; for example a popular lady boy show is located a few miles from the night market next to a large chain hotel/conference centre.

These four tourist areas each occupied a slightly different niche in the larger tourism market but also offered access to a sex tourist market. They acted as sites of comparison during the research and demonstrated how both the history and the tourism marketing of a particular space could influence tourists' decisions to visit and explore these sexualized areas.

### **A Brief Typology of Sexualized Venues and Spaces in Thailand**

Within each of these four cities, the sex industry was evidenced in a number of different ways, and at each site there were a number of sexualized spaces/places that tourists might visit as part of their visit to Thailand. Massage parlors and go-go bars have been popularized in cultural and touristic references (as will be shown in Chapter Three) and are well known as part of the Thai sex industry. However, there are a large number of venues that are part of the modern tourist scene that are open and available to both male and female tourists (and many are considered suitable venues for children as well); importantly the venues that are explored as part of this study are those that are situated for visual touristic engagement. The sexualized and voyeuristically contrived spaces/places presented here were present in the four main tourist cities that form the core of this study. This section will highlight the types of sexualized venues that were observed and visited over the course of the investigation<sup>9</sup>. The descriptions that follow are based on my own observations of these spaces.

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<sup>9</sup> There is some discrepancy in what 'activities' are ascribed to certain locations or venues - for example some go-go bars cross over into ping pong shows at a certain time in the evening or on certain days. As well, there are a variety of names that can be used in addition to the ones listed here - outdoor male pubs are rather oddly called 'bar beers' by western men/customers and would have Thai men working as sex workers, but there are also normal pubs that do not sell sex. This typology attempts to employ terms that allow for differentiation and ease of understanding.

### *Red Light Areas*

'Red light' areas form an important part of the Thai sex industry. Here tourists can wander around and look into go-go bars, glance at lady boys and prostitutes, and glimpse ping pong shows from a 'safe' vantage point- they can be part of the milieu yet separate from the 'real' action at the same time. However, these spaces are important tourist sites and are highlighted in guidebooks and cultural guides as 'hot spots' or 'must sees' (Chapter Three); red light areas form a constitutive part of the Thai sex industry and their importance as a visually oriented sexualized space *and* tourist site cannot be overlooked. Red light areas may be best classified as sites where a number of different entertainment venues are organized close together, and where selling sex or the promotion of sexually related shows is prevalent; these sites are usually located near other normal bars and pubs or market areas.

### *Venues featuring female sex workers*

There are a number of different types of venues that feature female sex workers, performing in different ways.

#### Open-Air Go-Go Bars

These types of bars usually feature casually dressed Thai women (they often wear skirts and skimpy tops or small dresses, but are not usually bikini or lingerie clad) who interact with customers and are available as sex workers- but usually do not dance. These venues vary in size depending on the area- for example on the beach road in Pattaya there are large outdoor venues that have a number of smaller bars under the same roof- where there are easily 60-70 women available as sex workers. In Chiang Mai, while the some of the go-go bars are next to or near each other, they are discrete from one another and much smaller, and seem to employ five to seven women per bar. Because the women working in these venues are not wearing

clothes that might be considered risqué to western tourists (although would certainly be considered risqué to middle class Thai people) western women sometimes do not realize that the Thai women working here are sex workers.

### Indoor Go-Go Bars

These bars usually feature bikini or lingerie clad women who dance on stage and are available as sex workers. The stage is often visible through an open door that allows potential customers and passers-by to glimpse in. These venues vary widely in size- with some bars having upwards of 15-20 women on stage at one time - to bars where only two or three women are dancing on the platforms. Women working usually have a number pinned to their bikini or lingerie so customers can easily pick them out.

### Ping Pong Shows

Ping pong shows vary somewhat depending on the location. For instance many of the shows in Bangla road are small venues that are relatively well-lit and seem to cater to a mostly white, western, tourist audience that come to watch a set piece that lasts for 20-30 minutes and then leave. In contrast to this, some of the ping pong shows in Pattaya offer a much larger space that is quite darkly lit (you could see other tourists very easily in Phuket while this was harder to do in the Pattaya shows) and they seem to cater to Asian tourists (both Thai and non-Thai) and Russian tourists, as well as western tourists. The Pattaya shows last much longer- Phuket shows offer looped performances with the same tricks repeated frequently, whilst none of the tricks repeated in the Pattaya shows over a two-hour period. The customers at the Pattaya shows seem to stay for longer periods of time than their Phuket counterparts. Despite the variation in shows, these venues usually feature three to six women that perform different 'tricks'. These tricks largely entail women inserting an object or objects into her vagina- often off stage- and pulling these items out her vagina in front of the

audience. The women often wear bras or bikini tops and no pants or bikini bottoms, leaving the shaved/shorn vagina bare. The tricks can vary widely, but some of the most popular are: inserting a ping pong ball into the vaginal canal and shooting it out at the audience (whence the name 'ping pong show'), pulling yards and yards of colored ribbon out of the vagina, pulling yards of string with dozens of straight razor blades attached out of the vagina, pulling or 'popping' live animals out (birds, turtles, fish, etc.), women smoking a cigarette using their vaginas, live sex, including heterosexual sex or two woman having sex<sup>10</sup>. In some of the bars the women performing tricks are also available as sex workers while other bars had go-go dancers available as sex workers while the performers did not generally sell sex. A few bars (particularly in Phuket) do not generally have any women available as sex workers, but rather only employ women to perform tricks for an audience. Some ping pong shows are on a short circuit, with each show lasting 10-15 minutes- with a fairly constant turn-over of customers for each circuit and a limited repertoire of tricks on offer. Other shows have a much longer circuit, with a much wider range of tricks where customers stay for much longer periods of time,

#### *Venues Featuring Male Sex Workers*

There are also a wide variety of shows featuring male sex workers, although these types of venues are generally more popular with western gay male tourists than with female tourists.

#### Open-Air Pubs

These outdoor pubs in gay areas usually featured Thai men (both gay, straight, and bisexual) who wear tight tee shirts and interact with mostly older, gay male customers. Most of these men are available as sex workers although some of the bars allow workers discretion in who

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<sup>10</sup> While some of the shows are usually sold as 'lesbian' shows I hesitate to use this terminology as the women involved do not self-identify as lesbians.

they chose to go home with (this was certainly true in some bars in Boyztown, but seemed less true in the ‘cheaper’ gay areas in other locations such as Sunnee Plaza in Pattaya).

### Indoor Go-Go Bars

Indoor go-go bars feature Thai men wearing number tags pinned to tight pants or speedo bottoms who are available as sex workers (to mostly male but in some cases also female customers). Boys usually dance in rotation on stage, often touching themselves to maintain a semi-erection. The doors to these venues are usually closed, or have heavy curtains at the front, making it difficult to see what is happening from the outside<sup>11</sup>.

### Boy Shows

These shows might be comparable to male strip clubs in a western context, and are present in all four areas, but are much less common in Chiang Mai than the other three cities. Many of the boy shows feature choreographed dancing with male performers sometimes lip-syncing to western music. These shows generally feature a mixture of ‘masculine’ and ‘effeminate’ looking men who usually wear scant costumes (such as loin cloths or very small hot pants) and often interact quite physically with one another on stage; the tone of these shows is overtly sexual. For example, one show in Pattaya features a shower scene where two men wearing very small bathing suits shower together on stage, soaping and touching each other, passionately kissing and displaying their obvious arousal.

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<sup>11</sup> It is unclear why these acts are curtained off when similar acts with female dancers are not as the shows are not any more explicit than equivalent female go-go bars. It is possible that shows featuring Thai men with semi-erected penises on display are considered more risqué, in line with ping pong shows and more overtly sexualized venues with female dancers which also have a curtained entrance.

### *Venues Featuring Transsexual/Transvestite Sex Workers*

Ladyboy shows usually featured Thai (male to female) transsexuals (non-op, pre-op and post-op) or transvestites who lip-sync and dance to a variety of 'camp' songs- they generally wear show gowns or show costumes. Lady boy shows vary widely in size, with slight but important variations:

#### Large-Scale Lady Boy Shows

These shows were often very popular and held in large venues, and some of these shows are national chains, which can hold upwards of 300 people (with some holding over 600). Main up-market shows like 'Simon Cabaret' usually conduct two shows per evening with potentially hundreds of guests in attendance. Sets, choreography, and costumes for these shows are intricately and expensively designed, and the trans-gendered workers usually perform a type of hyper-femininity. These shows are usually open to all tourists and can easily be booked through travel agents or hotels; prostitution is not normally available at these more 'family friendly' spaces.

#### Small-Scale Lady Boy Shows

The smaller lady boy shows (often located in the gay or red light areas) usually hold one, maybe two shows per evening with a capacity of 50 or so guests. Set designs and costumes are much simpler and the shows are much shorter in length. There are usually a mix of trans-gendered performers and gay men in the venue and the line between the performance and selling sex is much less defined; these smaller venues seem to be marketed as a gay space with more overt sexual interactions between performers and clients, rather than a family friendly area. Indeed while there were often children present at the large-scale cabarets, no children were ever observed at the smaller shows.

Whilst this is not an exhaustive list of all the places sex are sold or where sexual entertainment is available for consumption (massage parlors are a notable exception here), these venues were the main focus of the research study and the most obvious sexualized venues located in major tourist areas; they are also designed as spaces where watching and looking is a crucial part of the entertainment<sup>12</sup>.

Having given an overview of the research sites and the specific sexual venues that comprised the research area, the next section will situate the research process, examining the sampling strategy, the recruitment process, the research approach, and providing a rationale for the research design.

### **Sampling**

A theoretical sampling strategy was used for the research project. Glaser and Strauss (1967) have suggested that theoretical sampling can be a useful tool for ethnographic researchers, and provide a definition:

The process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45).

This sampling strategy was beneficial in the sense that it allows for a more formalized data collection process. Burgess notes:

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed description of these and other sexual venues in Thailand, c.f. Lim, 1998.

Theoretical sampling... involved researchers in observing groups with a view to extending, modifying, developing and verifying theory... “Theoretical sampling” formalizes various activities that... are important in field studies: having enough evidence, having enough data in a particular area, and deciding when to move on to other related problems (Burgess, 1984:56).

The first stage of the fieldwork agenda called for observations of sexualized areas to explore the extent of western women’s engagement with the sex industry. In an ethnographic study where there are potentially a number of groups (western tourists, Thai locals, hotel staff, sex workers, etc.) that might help add to the data, a theoretical sampling strategy allowed for room to engage with a variety of people that provided different insights to those of the ‘core’ group and served to enrich the data more generally. Table 2.2 provides an outline of the types of groups/people that were accessed, and the type of investigative method employed.

**Table 2.2**

<b>Key Contacts</b>	<b>Method of Investigation Employed</b>
<b>Female Tourists in Thailand</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnographic research fieldwork contact/conversations with 80 women tourists</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 western women tourists</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys with 131 female tourists</li> </ul>
<b>Male Tourists in Thailand</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnographic research fieldwork contact/conversations with 20 gay male westerners and 10 straight male westerners</li> </ul>
<b>Tourism Stakeholders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnographic research fieldwork contact/conversations with hoteliers</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interviews with 7 hotel owners/management</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnographic research fieldwork contact/conversations with bar owners/managers and tourist touts</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interviews with 5 go-go bar owners</li> </ul>
<b>Participant Observations in Sexualized Areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 100 hours of observations undertaken in red light areas, female go-go bars, male go-go bars, ping pong shows, lady boy cabarets</li> </ul>

‘The ethnographic imagination necessitates flexibility, which is definitely the case with studies of/with tourists’ (Frohlick and Harrison, 2008:7). I was unsure before I set out for Thailand how western women might be interacting with the sex industry as there was little existing data about the behaviors of women in Thai tourist settings. Having established which tourists cities I would initially focus on, my aim was then to explore the tourist settings and observe what was happening, allowing data to emerge from observations and engagement with local and tourist contacts. Using a theoretical sampling strategy in this ethnographic study meant exploring a wide range of tourist/sexualized settings and engaging with the tourist and local actors located in these areas.

The first two months of exploratory investigation confirmed that western women tourists were indeed visiting sexualized venues in tourist areas, and many women were visiting ping pong shows and explicit sexual shows. Some western women were also engaging in commercially sexual relationships with Thai men, but this was a small exception of women. Stewart suggests ethnographers should consider ‘an observation that does not fit a generalization as invaluable’ (Stewart, 1998:21). The initial observations suggested that perhaps women tourists were also accessing sexualized spaces as part of their tourist experience, which goes against the supposed norm of western women’s behavior Thailand (Manderson, 1992; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Bowes, 2004). As such, the decision was made after initial observations were conducted (c.f. Chapter Four) to focus more exclusively on western women visitors in specific sexualized tourist settings.

When surveying and interviewing western women in Thailand, it was impossible to tell which women might have had some kind of interaction with the sex industry, as Devine and Heath note: ‘In the absence of physical characteristics which mark out members of certain groups in distinctive ways...it is almost impossible to accurately estimate the size of a hidden population’ (Devine and Heath, 1999: 126). As such, surveys and interviews were offered to all women in the targeted area (a strip of beach, a café, a park, etc.), and the sample group

was largely limited by the participant's desire to participate, and their ability to speak/read English. The exploratory nature of the study enabled a wide sampling strategy, and a diverse range of participants contributed to the research.

In order to gain a holistic view of the phenomenon being studied, a number of research methods were employed: observation, surveys, and (formal and informal) interviews, which will be outlined below.

### **Participant and Non-Participant Observation**

Over 100 hours of observations were undertaken in red light areas, female go-go bars, male go-go bars, ping pong shows, lady boy cabarets. Participant observation is a critical component of the ethnographic research process; participant observation played an important role in establishing the ways in which women were engaging with the sex industry and was the core research method used as I tried to establish key areas in the research sites to focus on- and finally located specific bars, clubs, and venues that were frequented by female tourists. Being a researcher in these tourist areas meant that it was necessary to participate in the normal touristic activities that other female tourists were engaging in. By visiting the bars, clubs, beaches, cafes, shows, etc. that western women visiting I was able to establish the types of areas they were visiting, who they were visiting these areas with, the types of interactions they had in a particular space, and the types of reactions they had to these situations.

Upon my arrival in the various research sites, I moved around different spaces trying to determine who were the main social actors engaging with particular spaces and places. While this initial process of observation was sometimes hit or miss, in terms of establishing relevance for a particular area, the focus eventually emerged from this type of unfettered observation, and the research areas and target groups became more clearly defined. In this

way, the research involved a process of ‘progressive focusing’, where the formation of specific research questions was linked to the emerging data:

The process [of data collection] may seem unsystematic; in the beginning, it is somewhat uncontrolled and haphazard. Even in the early stages of fieldwork, however, the ethnographer searches out experiences and events as they come to attention. Participant observation sets the stage for more refined techniques... and becomes more refined itself as the fieldworker understands more and more about the culture... Participant observation can also help clarify the results of more refined instruments by providing a baseline of meaning and a way to re-enter the field to explore context for those (often unexpected) results (Fetterman, 1998:35).

My aim during the observation process was to gather information about tourist and sexualized spaces, to observe how women interact and relate to specific sexualized settings, and to derive the key research questions based on these observations. I recorded where possible (using note taking, sometimes retreating to toilets to jot down important details in a notebook) both conversations and activities that were taking place. The setting of the observation largely determined how the data was recorded. For example, taking notes openly on the beach was a relatively easy means of recording data, but open note taking in a crowded, noisy bar where a sexual show was taking place was far from ideal<sup>13</sup>; the method of note taking varied depending on the context.

I conducted more ‘focused observations’ in some key tourist areas, actually counting tourists and mapping areas to try and provide a more detailed picture of who was accessing particular sites, and when. Fife (2005) notes that when conducting this kind of focused observation, ‘counting does not...provide us with the same kind of statistical assurance that some quantitative researchers obtain....but it does provide the qualitative researcher with yet

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<sup>13</sup> See Spicker (2011) for more on the ethics of conducting ‘covert’ research.

another check on their ethnographic reasoning' (Fife, 2005: 87). My aim during these focused observations was to count how many tourists were in the space at a given time, focusing on the ratio of male to female tourists.

While Fife (2005) suggests that it should be relatively easy to count male and female tourists in a given space, in Thailand this was not so straightforward. Deciding who was a tourist and who was a local was actually very difficult, so the counts were limited to people who stood out as tourists. To determine who counted as a tourist in this space, an intuitive (and subjective) process underwrote the observations. People who were obviously white were often counted, although clothing, demeanor, guidebooks, cameras, tourist gear, pace of walking, and a variety of other intangibles were used to intuit who might be a tourist in this space. This means that it is entirely likely that a number of Asian tourists who were not Thai (or Thai tourists from other areas) have not been included in these figures. As well, western expatriates who live in Thailand may have also been mistaken for tourists, and western tourists of Asian descent might have been left out of the counts. As such, I cannot claim that these observations reflect the exact composition of tourists in the area, as it was impossible to say for sure who was a tourist and who was not. Indeed people's own definitions of whether or not they are tourists is less than straightforward- someone who has been backpacking around Thailand for a year would most likely be offended if put in the same category as a package tourist fresh off the boat- and likewise a Thai visitor from a neighboring city may not include themselves as tourists, although they might be visiting the area for the first time in the way that other western tourists might- so while defining with certainty who was or was not a tourist was complicated, the observations at least provide a general idea of how many people were in each area and what the broad make-up was of people milling around particular spaces/venues.

## **Recruiting Participants and Surveying Female Tourists**

Recruitment and surveying are discussed together in this section, as the strategy used for recruiting tourist women to participate in the study was often the survey itself. Recruiting participants in a tourist setting can be problematic, firstly as tourists are often reluctant to take time out of their entertaining tourist activities to speak to researchers (Harrison, 2003), and secondly in the case of this research project, because the nature of the discussion was sensitive and relatively serious in nature, tourists are often reluctant to critically engage with these contentious issues. As Frohlick and Harrison note: ‘...part of the tourist experience is a blissful unawareness of the social and political realities of the lives of local people’ (Frohlick and Harrison, 2008: 6). Talking about sex tourism and prostitution seemed to interrupt this state of tourist oblivion, and western women would sometimes break off interviews or suddenly remember they had an important appointment elsewhere when the subject of their engagement with sexual spaces came up. Both of these issues were relevant factors in the recruitment and engagement of research participants on the research project, and indeed made the process very difficult at points. As such, creative strategies were employed to try and increase women’s participation.

Initially I approached women in a variety of settings<sup>14</sup> and would ask if I could speak to them about their tourist experiences and their understandings of the sex industry. If they said yes I would then tell them I was undertaking research for a PhD, looking at the ways western women engaged with and understood the sex industry in Thailand. While a few women agreed to take part in the research via this approach, many refused to speak to me even before they had heard about the sexualized aspect of the process. Many of them had other engagements or said they did not want their touristic space intruded upon. Some of them said

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<sup>14</sup> During the daytime in Phuket and Pattaya I approached women on the beaches, whereas it was easier to speak to women at cafes or hotel lobbies in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. In the evenings, I spent most of my time in the particular sexualized zone of the respective city speaking to women in red light areas and sexualized venues.

they did not want to talk about serious subjects on their vacation, while others suggested they felt uncomfortable talking about their own experiences of the sex industry. Some of the women who I spoke to refused to go on record, and objected even to notes being taken during the interview although they agreed their anonymized sentiments could be used as part of the data.

Research participants can often display alarm or discomfort when being asked about sensitive subjects or problematized behaviors (Brannen, 1988; Lee, 1993; Frohlick and Harrison, 2008). Dealing with both a sensitive research subject and a transient sample group, I began to think about other ways of making contact with participants. In November 2007 during the second month of fieldwork, I developed a short survey that had a number of questions about tourist experiences of the sex industry in Thailand. I then distributed these surveys to tourists sitting on the beach (in Pattaya and Phuket) or in hotel lobbies and cafes (Chiang Mai and Bangkok). Tourists were given a survey along with a pen/pencil and a blank unmarked envelope (so they could place the completed survey in the anonymous envelope and therefore ensure their anonymity if so desired). In Pattaya and Phuket I would mark out a 20 meter stretch of beach and ask all women seated on the beach in this area if they would complete the survey, while in Bangkok and Chiang Mai I would distribute surveys to women at 10-12 sites before coming back to the first site to collect the questionnaire. I told them I was a researcher from the University of Nottingham doing research on western women's experiences of the sex industry, and asked if they had ten minutes or so to complete an anonymous survey<sup>15</sup>. Women who could not speak or write English were not eligible but this was the only excluding criteria. The refusal rate varied depending on the location and the day; often I would get a near 100% completion rate and other days very few women wanted to participate at all, with a near 100% per cent refusal rate.

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<sup>15</sup> The surveys described the nature of the process, highlighted issues around confidentiality and anonymity, and provided my contact details. A copy of the survey can be found in the appendix.

After allowing 10-15 minutes for women to complete the questionnaire, I would return to collect the survey. The last page of the survey tells women that if they would be willing to discuss the issues highlighted further to please speak to the researcher when the surveys are collected. Some women did opt to discuss the issues highlighted, but again many did not want to be recorded as they felt more comfortable having an 'informal' conversation. Some women were interviewed on the beach or in a café while some others opted to meet later to discuss the issues raised. Some left contact details so that they could be reached after their holiday.

While the survey was devised as a means of making initial contact with women and giving them an idea of what the research investigation was about, it also elicited useful data. However, there is a possibility that women's responses may not have been as honest as they might have been with a survey that dealt with other types of social behavior. There is some suggestion that respondents who are given self-administered questionnaires reported 'lower levels of socially undesirable behavior than was true of other methods' (Lee, 1993), and indeed, two women who I interviewed that had previously completed the questionnaire alluded to their difference in response. They told me that, although they had marked on their survey that they did not want to see a sex show during their visit, actually they would want to visit these spaces if the circumstances were appropriate. This suggests perhaps other women may have been reluctant to list this opinion on their survey, but in reality their interpretation of the sex industry may be more complicated. The survey data provides interesting insights into the views and opinions women held, and works well with the other research methods (observations, formal, and informal/conversational interviews) to provide a more detailed picture of the phenomenon at hand.

### **The Survey Participants**

This section highlights the demographic details of the 131 women who filled in the survey. As detailed information about tourist demographics are not held by the TAT, it is difficult to say whether these women reflect the larger female tourist population in Thailand. However, this section provide an overview of the range of women who participated in the study, and it seems that by and large a variety of women of different ages, national backgrounds, and travel status participated in the study.

There was a fairly equal spread of women interviewed across the cities, although slightly fewer women were surveyed in Chiang Mai, and slightly more surveyed in Bangkok. However, many of the women surveyed and interviewed had been to several other places in Thailand during their visit, so being surveyed in Bangkok does not necessarily mean that is the only Thai city they will have visited.

<b>Survey Location n=131</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
Bangkok	37%
Chiang Mai	15%
Phuket	26%
Pattaya	23%

Almost all of the women (86%) were in Thailand on holiday, while some others were there teaching, studying, or visiting family.

<b>Purpose of Visit n=131</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
On Holiday	86%
Business	3%
Other	7%
Visiting Family	4%

Most of the women (30%) were traveling with female friends while 26% were traveling with partners. As well a number of women (17%) were traveling alone while 13% were with their families.

<b>Travel Status n=130</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
With Female Friends	30%
With Partners	26%
Solo	17%
Families	13%
Other	14%

Nearly all of the women (80%) had organized their travel independently.

<b>Organized Travel n=131</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
Independently	80%
Package Holiday	16%
N/A	4%

A wide range of nationalities were represented in the sample, with 40 British women, 19 North American women (USA and Canada), 13 German, 11 Swedish and 10 Antipodean (New Zealand and Australia) the most frequently surveyed.

<b>Nationality n=131</b>	<b>Number of Women</b>
American (9)	7%
Australian (9)	7%
Austrian (1)	<1%
Belgium (1)	<1%
British (38)	29%
Canadian (11)	8%
Danish (7)	5%
Dutch (8)	6%
Finish (3)	2%
French (1)	<1%
German (13)	10%
Hungarian (1)	<1%
Irish (3)	2%
New Zealand (1)	<1%
Norway (5)	4%
Portuguese (1)	<1%
Russian (1)	<1%
Scottish (1)	<1%
South African (1)	<1%
Swedish (11)	8%
Swiss (4)	3%
Welsh (1)	<1

In terms of ethnic background and sexual orientation, the sample was overwhelmingly white and straight.

<b>Ethnicity n=131</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
White (129)	98%
Asian (1)	1%
Mixed Race (1)	1%

<b>Sexual Orientation n=131</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
Straight (128)	98%
Bisexual (3)	2%

In terms of age, most of the women were between 18 and 40 years of age, with 23% were aged 40 or over.

<b>Age of Participant n=131</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
18-24	40%
25-40	37%
41-60	18%
61+	5%

Occupations and educational levels varied widely but the most frequently listed response for occupations (35 respondents) was 'student'. As well, salaries varied widely from nothing at all to over \$100,000.

Most of the women in the survey sample were single (61.8%) while nearly 25% were married or cohabitating. Just over 5% were divorced or separated. Most of the women (71.8%) had no children.

<b>Marital Status n=119</b>	<b>Percentage of Women</b>
Single	68%
Cohabitating	4%
Married	22%
Separated	<1%
Divorced	5%

## **Interviews**

Alongside surveys and observations, interviews were also conducted. Seidman argues that: 'At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience' (1991: 3). Interview data provided a critical insight into how women understood their holiday experience, and took two forms: semi-structured/formal and informal.

Informal interviews were important source of data and are commonly used in ethnographic research. Fetterman notes that informal interviews may 'seem to be casual conversations, but whereas structured interviews have an explicit agenda, informal interviews have a specific but implicit research agenda' (Fetterman, 1998:38). As well, some theorists have suggested conversational style interviews elicit better and more accurate responses to questions. Burgess notes: 'Indeed [unstructured interviews] demonstrated how conversations were of greater value than straight question and answer sessions as they provided rich detailed data that could be used alongside other material' (1984:102).

Informal interviews were often used during the initial months of fieldwork, to gather a broad range of information from a wide variety of 'informants'. As I was still trying to understand how the sex tourist industry functioned, and how western women might be included in these (sexual) tourism processes, I wanted to gather as many opinions as possible from a wide range of people. It eventually became clear that more formal interviews with western women were necessary to gather more in-depth data, but the informal interviews and conversations that took place with female travelers, male tourists, hotel/bar staff, touts for sex shows, mamasans<sup>16</sup>, and management/event staff provided me with invaluable insights about the workings of the sex industry. These 'peripheral' people provided key insights into how tourists behave; in particular conversations with tourist industry workers (who have a good

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<sup>16</sup> Mamasan is the term used for any manager of a sexualized venue. 'Mamasan' can refer to a male, female, or transgender manager.

deal of interaction with tourists) elicited very useful data that helped shape the research agenda. These informal interviews were usually unstructured (although a few formal interviews did take place) but generally these engagements operated along the lines of a conversation. Fetterman comments:

An informal interview is different from a conversation, but it typically merges with one, forming a mixture of conversation and embedded questions...In most cases, the ethnographer has a series of questions to ask the participant and will wait for the most appropriate time to ask them during the conversation (if possible)' (Fetterman, 1998:39).

Speaking to a wide range of people related to tourist and sexualized settings provided a more developed understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Gathering information from alternative sources using informal interviews provided for a fuller, more complete picture of female travelers' experiences in Thailand.

More formal interviews were used with female tourists in all four fieldwork sites, and the data collected from these interviews is an important source of empirical data. In total, 21 semi-structured formal interviews were conducted with western women in Phuket, Pattaya, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai.

## The Interview Participants

<b>Phuket</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Travel Status</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Interview Location</b>
Mandy	40	English	with partner	Cohabiting	Beach
Laura	40	English	with partner	Cohabiting	Beach
Alison	45	Australian	Solo	Married	hotel bar
Beth	25	English	Solo	Single	Beach
Christina	18	Australian	mixed group	Single	Beach
Sara	18	Australian	mixed group	Single	Beach

<b>Pattaya</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Travel Status</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Interview Location</b>
Amanda	45	English	Solo	Divorced	Bar
Hella	55	Dutch	with gay friends	Divorced	Café
Elizabeth	50	Swedish	mixed group	Divorced	Café
Diane	45	Danish	mixed group	Single	Café
Marianne	35	Irish	Solo	Single	Beach
Yvette	65	French	with Thai boyfriend	Boyfriend	hotel restaurant
Giselle	60	French	with female friend	Single	hotel restaurant

<b>Chiang Mai</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Travel Status</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Interview Location</b>
Gemma	30	German	Solo	Single	Café
Callie	25	English	mixed group	Single	Café
Loreta	27	English	mixed group	Single	restaurant
Cathy	32	English	Boyfriend	Boyfriend	café

<b>Bangkok</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Travel Status</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Interview Location</b>
Andrea	37	English	Solo	Single	café
Anna	24	Dutch	Solo	Single	hotel reception
Vicky	21	Scottish	female group	Single	restaurant
Ella	20	Scottish	female group	Boyfriend	restaurant

It is worth mentioning here that it is impossible to say anything about western women's experiences of Thailand in general. This thesis can only draw conclusions from the small group of women that I spoke to or interacted with, and even observations only allow for a conclusion to be drawn about what was happening in that particular space/place at that specific moment in time. In Chapter Four, Five, and Six I often use the broad term 'western

women' when drawing conclusions, although I am aware that these conclusions do not actual refer to all western women, but only the small group of women that I engaged with.

### **Ethical Issues**

All of the survey participants and women who were formally interviewed gave their informed consent and were guaranteed that their names and identifying details would be kept private. For survey participants this guarantee of anonymity was clearly stated on the first page of the survey, and was also made clear verbally when the survey was handed out. Interview participants gave verbal consent at the beginning of the interview, after the details of the research and the guarantee of confidentiality were made clear. Recorded data has been saved electronically with password protection to which the researcher has sole access.

Participant observation was an important component of the research project and obtaining informed consent in some situations was not possible. A good deal of time was spent observing (both overtly and covertly) in various public spaces where there were large groups of people in transit or tourists briefly held in a space/place, and where my engagement with research zones was limited, informed consent was not obtained from the people I was observing<sup>17</sup>.

As the focus of the research was largely on western women's engagements with the sex industry, my interactions with sex workers was limited. This was done intentionally, as the ethical issues involved with researching sex workers would have required a more careful consideration, given the language constraints and the potentially vulnerable position of women and men working in the sex industry. However, some contact was made with sex workers in various bars and clubs. In bars that I frequented regularly to conduct observations,

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<sup>17</sup> See Spicker (2011) for more on the complicated nature of the gaining consent in observational research settings

I got to know a number of sex workers (both male and female) who worked at these venues. In many tourist spaces, the transient nature of tourists usually means that Thai people working the tourist industry have a limited temporal interaction with westerners. The fact that I visited the same bars for many weeks made me noticeable to Thai sex workers employed at the bar, and these sex workers provided useful information about the area and its context, as well as details about the size, scale, and nature of the tourist population in a given space/place.

Once I had made contact with sex workers and got to know them, I told them about my research project and made clear that my observations in those spaces were part of my research. However, the information gathered from sex workers was limited to their knowledge of the areas and their knowledge of the types of tourists that frequent the bars/clubs in the nearby venues. A conscious effort was made not to engage with sex workers beyond this type of discussion<sup>18</sup>.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Observational notes were transcribed as soon as possible after the initial data collection; this is particularly relevant for notes that were taken covertly (for example going to the toilet to write down conversations/observations in the nightclub/shows), as it is possible that key ideas might not have been remembered as clearly if not recorded immediately.

With the informed consent of the interviewees, most of the formal interviews were recorded with a digital recording device, and the data was transcribed verbatim. Transcribing verbatim

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<sup>18</sup> My previous research experience in Thailand, interviewing female sex workers about their involvement with NGOs, was fraught with emotional encounters as sex workers revealed some of the sadder realities of their lives. This was upsetting for them, and for me as well. For this research, I felt it necessary to avoid this type of discussion to ensure the emotional well-being of everyone involved.

ensures that all relevant details from the interviews are captured, and reduces the risk of researcher bias in the transcription. As well, recording also allows for the sharing of data (as long as it doesn't compromise the anonymity of the participant), and ensures that the voices and the words of the research participants are accurately portrayed (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001:65). The data was coded thematically using a focused coding framework, which allowed for a conceptual analysis of the interview data (Charmaz, 2006).

Some interviewees did not want to be recorded, and some interview situations (in loud venues for example) made it impossible to record conversations. In these instances, notes were taken during the interview (with the consent of the participant) and key phrases and quotations were noted verbatim. Any indirect quotations from participants used in this thesis will be noted as such.

One of the most difficult problems I faced during the research process was that the women I spoke to, many of whom were obviously intelligent and educated women, able to speak eloquently about a variety of politically and socially sensitive subjects- including issues around the environmental impact of tourism, the role of religion in Thai society - seemed to be at a loss when it came to talking about their interactions with the sex industry. This trend was incredibly marked during the research, despite the fact that I tried to engage participants to speak about their experiences in a variety of ways. I believe that there are two methodological reasons for this seeming inability of western women tourists to effectively articulate their thoughts on the sex industry. Firstly, the sensitive nature of the subject matter may have played a role in their reluctance to delve fully into the issues raised. A number of social researchers (Van Maanen, 1982; Brannen, 1988; Lee, 1993) suggest that participants discussing issues of a sensitive nature can have difficulty in talking about these kinds of subjects; research participants 'may not have the vocabulary that allows them to discuss the problem, or they may deny it, or project it on to someone else' (Lee, 1993: 103). Secondly, the liminal and often hedonistic nature of the tourist experience seems to negatively impact

upon tourists' desire to engage and think cogently about the social/economic/political issues that impact local people (Harrison, 2003; Frohlick and Harrison, 2008).

I adapted my interview techniques and strategies over the course of the fieldwork to try to elicit more eloquent responses, to try and draw women out, to little avail. Understanding and analyzing silences in interviews is not straightforward (Poland and Pederson, 1998). Determining which analytic perspective to use was difficult, as I had to first decide how best to interpret these silences. Ultimately my examination of the gaps and silences led me to psychoanalysis, as its role in understanding hidden or un verbalized desires is central to its purpose. As such, Chapter Six employs a psychoanalytic framework to analyze the unspoken elements of the research.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Formal observations were conducted in Patpong, Walking Street, Boyztown, Bangla Road, and the Chiang Ma night market, with counts taken of the male and female tourists who visited these red light spaces. Observations in the red light areas entailed a 10-20 minute period of observation at a main entry or exit point in the district/street. Counts were conducted at different times of the evening over a number of days.

Survey responses were input into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to produce descriptive statistics and cross tabulations.

### **Textual Analysis**

In addition to the empirical data collected in Thailand, a textual analysis of travel literature (guidebooks, cultural guides, local tourist magazines) was undertaken. Exploring extant texts 'can complement ethnographic and interview methods' (Charmaz, 2006), and in this case

served as an important source of data. Chapter Three highlights this analysis of relevant popular cultural material on Thailand (novels, films and journalistic accounts) was conducted. Analysis of popular cultural material and travel literature has been used by a number of tourism theorists (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Jacobs, 2001; Schellhorn and Perkins, 2004) to help assess the ways in which particular destinations are understood and represented. As it would be impossible to analyze all the sources of information that tourists might access on Thailand, a selection of guidebooks and guides that tourists have easy access to while they are actually in Thailand will be explored. This analysis of literature related to Thailand helps to position its mythology and provides useful details about how tourists may conceptualize Thai culture before they even arrive in Thailand. The data from this textual analysis will be highlighted in Chapter Three.

### **Research Challenges**

The next section will highlight some of the problems that I encountered during the research process. There were a number of issues related to safety that needed to be considered before entering the field, and once in Thailand I had to renegotiate these imposed guidelines as certain situations elicited unexpected emotional reactions. I will discuss these safety issues, focusing on both physical and emotional safety, and provide details of my reflexive engagement with my own actions in the field as these give a better understanding of how the research process developed.

### **Dealing with Safety**

Dealing with issues around safeguarding the physical and emotional safety of the researcher was an important component to consider when configuring the research design. Safety issues have recently been given more credence by research councils, research centers, and universities. Qualiti's recently commissioned report on the risks to researchers in the field

highlights the importance placed on safeguarding postgraduate researchers in the field (Bloor et al, 2007). The draft document of this report helped to identify key ethical/safety issues that needed to be considered before the commencement of fieldwork. For my research, a risk assessment was carried out and safety issues were discussed in the supervision leading up to the fieldwork start date. As well, my research was conducted in very tourist-centered areas, and Thailand's image as a tourist-friendly destination depends upon the safeguarding of tourists in these spaces. While many of the sex tourist areas felt unfriendly, and the tourists there were sometimes unpleasant, in general the areas were well-lit, well-populated, and well-staffed with security professionals who ensured my safety as well as the safety of the workers and the other guests.

As well, I spent a good deal of the trip as a solo woman in Thailand. My position as a young, solo woman was useful in some spaces. It allowed my research participants to relate to me—some women were happy to talk about their experiences and many women wanted to interact socially after the interview was over and the tape recorder turned off<sup>19</sup>. At other times, patrolling the beaches or cafes on my own ended up in upsetting situations; I was propositioned more than once by western men on the beach, and shouted at or treated aggressively by both male and female tourists. As well, the relationships that I developed with key informants in the field were sometimes complicated. I ended up eating fried crickets to impress a Thai sex worker at a bar I often visited, after days of teasing that I was too *farang*<sup>20</sup> to eat such delicacies. This seemingly unimportant act actually worked to establish trust between us, and it became easier to engage and interact together after that, however these types of experiences felt overwhelming at times.

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<sup>19</sup> Some women suggested having dinner or meeting for a coffee, while others said they would like to accompany me to sexual venues in the evening. In general I avoided personal contact with my research participants as I felt I needed to maintain a professional boundary.

<sup>20</sup> *Farang* is a descriptive (and sometimes derogatory) term that is used by Thai people to refer to white westerners.

My time in the field participating in some of these activities was not always easy. Eating crickets, for example, while not as unpleasant as I had imagined (they taste like very crunchy fried chicken), provoked an emotional reaction, and many of my encounters with my research participants or contacts in the field brought out emotional issues. At times I felt besieged in the sexual spaces I was visiting, and sometimes felt upset at having to spend so much time in these sexualized, loud, dirty places. Finding ways to manage my emotions and dealing with risks faced during the fieldwork was an important part of the research process. Most of the risks I faced were due to the emotional fallout from conducting research in an environment that was highly sexualized. Geraldine Lee-Treweek and Stephanie Linkogle talk about the concept of emotional danger in fieldwork, and define emotional danger:

...as the experience of severe threat due to negative feeling states induced by the research process...Emotional danger is a complex subject because research settings may produce diverse emotions in researchers and participants (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle; 2000: 13).

Negotiating the field as a tourist/non-tourist presented a number of challenges that I had to find ways of dealing with while in the field. Being able to reflect upon these events and think about my own position/place within the research environment was helpful not only in ensuring that I could think creatively about how to better the research process, but also meant that I was able to think about the emotions of conducting research and to use this emotional process as part of my data. Indeed, approaching the research process reflexively enables an exploration of the emotional work involved in doing research: 'Within qualitative research reflexivity provides an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on emotional encounters within the research...Reflecting on research provides an opportunity for the researcher to look at emotional encounters with the participants and to utilize them for data analysis' (Takhar, 2009: 32).

Autobiographical methods allow for critical and reflexive modes of enquiry (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Letherby, 2003; Noy, 2007). Autoethnography allows the researcher to ‘address herself or himself...as a research subject of a larger social or cultural group...by ways of revealing research and writing... Frequently autoethnographic research is an investigation into the relationship between researchers, their fields of inquiry and their informants’ (Noy, 2007:352). A key part of the research process was writing a field diary, where my thoughts, feelings, and experiences were recorded. These critical reflections of my time in the field, as both a researcher and a tourist, provide useful insights into the way that my experiences shaped both the research process and my own understandings of both female tourists and the sexual spaces they visited.

It was often true that the emotional work involved in the research process was at its most critical during my interactions with sexual spaces such as ping pong shows. My own explorations elicited emotional responses to situations that were useful for a standard of comparison – for instance after watching my first ping pong show I spent most of the night feeling upset and near tears, but this reaction seemed very different to the fun, light hearted experience that many of my participant had spoken about – these emotional responses became important starting points for the research to develop. Autoethnographic research, which demands a critical and a reflective engagement, also ‘forces us to admit the extent to which much of one’s tourism-related experience resonates with feelings of alienation, sadness, aloneness, and other bleak and disconcerting experiences’ (Noy, 2007:353). In this sense, my own experiences serve as useful data for the research, enabling a critical examination of the tourist experience from the perspective of both a ‘researcher’ and as a ‘tourist’.

## **Reflexivity**

Debates about knowledge in the social sciences have thrown doubt upon positivistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality within the research process (Stanley and Wise, 1990; Skeggs,

1994; Letherby, 2003). The importance of reflexivity as a research tool has been highlighted by feminist researchers (Oakley, 1981; Jaggard, 1989; Stanley and Wise, 1991; Hammersley, 1992; Wolf, 1996; Takhar, 2009) and social science researchers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) alike. Many of these authors have called for a more reflexive stance on research, one that acknowledges the subjective nature of the research process and the always embodied/situated nature of our engagements with research participants. However, there is also an awareness that conducting qualitative research reflexively can present a number of ethical and emotional problems for researchers that are not always easily resolved (Price, 1996; Harris, 1997; Edwards and Ribbens, 1998) particularly when the research focuses on sensitive issues (such as sex or sexuality) (Grenz, 2005; Bott, 2010).

My experience of conducting research in Thailand is necessarily influenced by my class, race, gender, and so on. My own position, as a white, straight, American/British citizen, most certainly influenced my own interpretations of the space, mediated the reactions of my participants to me and to my questions, and more generally impacted upon the research process. As well, my position as a tourist/non-tourist impacted the research as well. I was not simply an observer of tourists - I was often a tourist myself - although as a researcher I was simultaneously living a non-tourist existence. During my research trip I stayed in hotels, ate at restaurants, went to the beach, and went on tourist outings. In short I did all the activities that any tourist might do. On the other hand, I spent almost all of my time in Thailand working, trying to find tourists willing to talk to me, patrolling the beach with surveys, making contacts with local proprietors, writing field notes, and generally worrying about the research process!

I was ultimately guided by the idea that good research necessarily takes into account one's own position (Stanley and Wise, 1990). However I am also aware that there is a danger of revealing too much when writing reflectively about the research process, especially when dealing with a sensitive and emotive topic such as sex and sex tourism (Sanchez Taylor and

O'Connell Davidson, 2009). I found other academics' reflexive accounts of their experiences the Thai sex industry problematic. Some of these accounts are startlingly uncritical, Sikes' (2006) account of her visual exploration of the sex industry in Thailand was particularly troubling as she presents her voyeuristic and touristic engagement with ping pong shows as an exciting and thrilling tourist experience. She talks about her visit to Patpong noting:

Men sidle alongside and whisper to HT, 'Want sex DVD, video?' 'What did he want? What did he say?' I shout, trying to be heard above the general clatter. It's different, exciting, like nowhere else I've ever been. Although we're tempted to stop, take in the atmosphere, linger and look at the goods, we're going shopping tomorrow with a Thai friend of Martyn's who, we've been told, will be able to get us a good deal and, for now, we want some live action. But where to go? Martyn said not to pay to go anywhere and not to go upstairs: that you could get the atmosphere and the sights for free (Sikes, 2006:3).

Sikes's personal (yet also academic) account of the sex industry in Patpong seems to suggest this space is a must do, exciting tourist experience, with little recognition of the problems associated with this type of engagement. Even Bishop and Robinson (1998) who provide a critical examination of sexual markets in Thailand, set out their position, I think somewhat problematically, in their introduction:

'You have to do it,' Ryan tells me. 'You have to go there the way you have to visit Dachau.' It's my first evening in Thailand, and I met my dinner partner, an American resident in Bangkok, half an hour ago. After some general conversation involving our whole party, he addresses me privately for the first time, saying 'I want to take you to the sex shows.' 'You what?' That's when he adds the remark about Dachau- a line calculated to provoke- and declares that as a feminist I must not leave without exploring international sex tourism as practiced in the nightspots of Bangkok. When I

accept the invitation, I become, in essence, a sex tourist's tourist. (Bishop and Robinson, 1998:6).

While these reflections may simply be described as 'honest accounts', the effect can be alienating for the reader. For these authors, as well as other academics who have written about their experiences (Odzer, 1994; Seabrook, 1997), there is a danger of revealing too much- or in writing about personal experiences, of moving away from the critical engagement that defines good academic writing; this personalized 'too much' sometimes taints the overall aim of the project, or takes away from the important points that are being raised. I am also aware that the reflections I made in my field diary while 'in the field' are much different to my interpretations of these events two years later. For example, in Pattaya several western men made an assumption that I was a Russian sex worker in their initial conversations with me. I felt quite upset at the time that I would be mistaken for a sex worker and remember feeling a sense of indignation about this. Now, however, I am curious about what exactly marked me out, and I have been able to think about this issue without feeling particularly emotional about it in the way I did at the time. As Sanchez Taylor and O'Connell Davidson note, writing about their return to data collected on the sex industry ten years after the fact: 'it seems we only partially knew and understood the 'selves' we were trying to situate in the research' (2009:43).

Taking these issues into consideration, I think it is important for me to be aware of how my position may have impacted the research, and I have carefully considered how my own interactions with the sex industry implicate me as much as the women I am critical of- as an ethnographer of tourists visiting sexual spaces, I also visually consumed these sexual sights/sites as part of the research process. I went to ping pong shows, I watched Thai men and women dancing half naked in their underwear, I visually consumed red light spaces, and I participated in the sex industry in the same way that many other western female tourists do. However, my reflexivity and my recognition of these issues has helped me, to some extent I

believe, keep a critical distance, and has allowed me the ability to interpret and explore the ways in which western women react to the sex industry in different ways, in less critical and less reflexive ways.

Donna Haraway argues that researchers should aim to exist and live 'in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions' (1991:187). I was aware of the position of privilege and power that I was in, as a white western women in a developing country, as a PhD researcher and observer. I worked constantly to reflect on my own position within these various prisms of privilege - by writing in my field diary and talking through these issues with my supervisors, as well as with close friends and family, and by attempting to practice reflexivity- and I hope that I understood the nature of women's engagements with the sex industry, even as I took part in it.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research process was to explore western women's interactions with sexual spaces in Thailand. This exploratory project sought to situate the experiences of western women as tourists in Thailand, and to understand how they interact with sexualized arenas as part of their tourist experience. To grasp the various ways in which the sex industry is presented to tourists, and the ways in which women tourists engaged with sexual spaces, I wanted to explore women's interactions in the tourist setting. By understanding the tourist world of Thailand through their eyes, by interacting with these spaces as both a researcher and a tourist, I was able to grasp some of the complexities of the Thai tourist experience, and better situate women's roles within these areas.

This chapter has laid out the research approach of the project, highlighting the key areas and people that were the focus of the study, and presenting information on the various research methods used to collect data. This chapter has sought to give the reader an appreciation of the challenges that were faced when researching such a diverse and amorphous group of women, including the emotional risks involved in researching a sensitive topic area.

## Chapter Three: Understanding Tourism in Thailand: Situating the Sex Industry

### Introduction

This chapter will explore two key issues. Firstly, to what extent has the sex industry has become entrenched in Thailand? Secondly, how are the sexualized discourses around Thailand sustained and promoted by the tourist industry?

Tourism research places a good deal of importance on the *image* a destination projects; the way a country is understood by visiting tourists can impact touristic behaviors/practices and a number of factors can influence the way tourists conceptualize a destination before they actually visit (Shields, 1991; Urry, 2002; Schellhorn and Perkins, 2004). This image travelers have of a particular destination can be understood 'as the expression of all knowledge, impressions, prejudices and emotional thoughts an individual or group has of a particular object or place' (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999:871). Place image is an important factor in determining which destinations a tourist might visit as '...the concepts of destination image and perception of place are closely linked, even mutually dependent' (Garrod, 2008:385); the image of a particular tourist location can impact on tourists' destination choices and holiday behaviors (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Gallarza et al go as far as to suggest that: 'The importance of the tourist destination's image is *universally acknowledged*, since it affects the consequent behavior and destination choice' (2002: 56, emphasis added). The particular image of a destination can have an important impact on a range of tourism processes.

Gunn (1972) has conceptualized a model that explores how the image formation process takes place, and argues that images of a place can be formed either organically, or can be induced. Organic images are derived from sources not directly affiliated with the tourism industry, for example popular cultural material such as films, books, or newspaper article. Induced images are the result of efforts made by tourism agents to advertize or promote particular

destinations. Gartner (1993) produced a typology of image-creating agents reproduced by Kim and Richardson here:

Overt induced I agent (referring to traditional forms of advertising); overt induced II agent (information received from tour operators); covert induced I agent (second-party endorsement of products through traditional forms of advertising); covert induced II agent (second-party endorsement through unbiased reports such as newspaper articles); autonomous agent (news and popular culture); unsolicited organic agent (unsolicited information received from friends and relatives); solicited organic agent (solicited information received from friends and family); and organic agent (actual visitation) (Kim and Richardson, 2003:217).

Understanding how destinations cultivate a particular image (or perhaps how a particular image is thrust upon a given destination), and critically how tourists interpret and receive these images is important. Tourists can receive ideas about a tourist area from a number of places, and these various sources (friends, guidebooks, movies, etc) that can impact on a tourist's perception of a particular destination need to be explored further.

Tourist research has called attention to the constructed nature of destination image. Shields refers to destination image as '... the various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality' (1991:60) and suggests that once places have been assigned meanings and attributed a symbolic character, the stereotype becomes closely associated with touristic impressions of specific space/places. The image of a particular destination can be influenced by the particular character of that country, but can equally be manipulated by external forces that may have a vested interest in presenting a destination in a particular light.

Thailand is frequently presented and portrayed as a sexualized/exoticized destination, and these eroticized representations may impact upon the image tourists have of Thailand. Oppermann et al suggest that 'tourist visitation patterns are greatly influenced by tourists' images and perceptions of destinations' (1998:20) thus certain representations of Thailand as sexual or exotic might influence the way tourists understand and interact with this particular place/space. The image of Thai culture as sexual and Thai people as sexually available may have an impact on what types of tourists visit Thailand, what types of activities they do when they are there, and if they decide to visit/see/engage with the sex industry as part of their visit. In this sense, establishing how Thailand is presented to potential tourists may help us to understand why tourists decide to visit certain cities/sites and what activities they seek out as part of their tourist experience. This chapter will argue that the perceptions people have about Thailand encourages them to see particular (erotic/exotic) sites/sights while eschewing those that do not fit their image of Thailand. It will do this by examining the historical processes and western representations of Thailand in the media and popular discourses to demonstrate how these worked to mutually reinforce the image of Thailand as erotic and Thai people as sexual. Urry (1990) argues that popular culture is important to the construction of place imagery, and this chapter will examine journalistic, television/celluloid, and literary depictions of Thailand as these can help elucidate the image that Thailand projects (Manderson, 1997; Anderson and Robinson, 2002; Dunn, 2006) and will also look at the representation of Thailand in guidebooks as these give a good insight into the way the Thai sex industry is represented touristically (Jacobs, 2001; Andsanger and Drzewiecka, 2002; Molina and Esteban, 2006).

In order to understand the role that the sex industry in Thailand has in the tourist imagination, it is important to contextualize the particular circumstances in which tourism and sex tourism developed. Academic discourses on tourism in Thailand have suggested that the sex industry and the tourism industry developed hand-in-hand (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Truong, 1990; Wilson, 2004) and that the historical underpinnings of prostitution in Thailand have

contributed to the modern-day sex tourist phenomenon (Truong, 1990; Bamber et al, 1993; Boonchalaski and Guest, 1998, Jeffrey, 2002). The historical processes that helped to create the international tourist and sex tourist market are linked into a variety of political, social, cultural, and economic movements that need to be considered together in order to give a better picture of how sex tourism emerged in Thailand. Western influence has impacted upon Thailand's prostitution policy from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while at the same time Thailand's image as a sexualized space has been popularized in western discourses. This chapter will begin by looking at the historical, social, and political processes in Thailand which have helped to create and maintain the international sex tourist industry, exploring how these developments have impacted upon western discourses around 'erotic Thailand' to create the modern-day image of Thailand as a sex tourist destination.

### **Tracing the Origins of Sex Tourism in Thailand**

In order to understand how Thailand has come to be seen as an erotic/exotic tourist destination, some consideration must be given to how the tourist-oriented sex industry became so widespread. This section will provide some of the historical, social, and political contexts of prostitution in Thai culture to understand how Thailand's image as an international sex tourist haven has come to be popularized.

Thailand has a history of prostitution and concubinage that stretches back centuries (Lysa, 1998). Boonchalaski and Guest (1998) suggest that while prostitution has long been part of Thai culture it was not always so pervasive as it is today. Traditionally, Thai men often maintained and fully supported minor wives or mistresses (*mia noi*), and such relationships have been common in Thailand for centuries (Wilson and Henley, 1994:16). However more traditional forms of prostitution have existed alongside these formalized relationships. In the Ayuddhya period (1350-1767) prostitution was legal and regulated by the government. Houses of ill repute were located in areas where Chinese migrants lived, and the (often)

Chinese sex workers in this time period served both foreign and Thai customers. Chinese migrant women continued to dominate as sex workers until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the economy and male (mostly Chinese) migrant community started to expand more dramatically; as it widened so too did the sex industry with more and more Thai women entering prostitution. Boonchalaski and Guest note that: ‘There has been a close association between prostitution, migrant communities and economic development throughout Thai history’ (1998:130).

Prostitution in Thailand continued to be legal and taxed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Between the latter 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the monarchy changed from absolute to constitutional, and with this change a number of (European) ‘modernizing’ reforms were brought into Thailand. Some key reforms focused around slavery and prostitution (Truong, 1990:149). During most of the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), the most common form of prostitutes were ‘stationed women’ who were essentially slaves kept in ‘houses of prostitution’ or what would today be known as brothels. These houses were often associated with other forms of entertainment such as gambling and opium smoking. In 1905 slavery was abolished and a substantial amount of the women that were kept as slaves became prostitutes voluntarily; the number of sex workers in many regions increased as a result. Truong notes:

The abolition of slavery led to the rapid increase in the number of prostitutes- who were newly freed slaves without land or other means of subsistence and who were absorbed by brothels. Disguised behind the issue of health, the sanctioning of prostitution was mainly based in its profitability as the influx of Chinese migrants (traders, miners, and port laborers who were mainly single males) created new demand for prostitutes’ services...Rather than being bonded to a slave owner, newly freed women became bonded to pimps and brothel owners who became their new masters (Truong, 1990:153).

At this point women working as prostitutes were serving both local and migrant men, and many Thai women serving foreign clients would take foreign names ‘in order to identify with their clients’ (Boonchalaski and Guest, 1998:130).

Growing knowledge of and concerns about public health led to the Contagious Disease Prevention Act of 1908, which mandated that women working as prostitutes register with the government; in addition all brothels were made to hang a lantern outside the premises to mark them out as houses of ill-repute. King Rama V (1868-1910) implemented this law as a way to control sexually transmitted diseases and to protect the public health. Female prostitutes were seen as spreaders of disease, and in fact one of the Thai words for prostitute, *ying sanchon rok* translates as ‘diseased woman’. The Act made no provision for medical care for the women, and male clients of sex workers were not mentioned as a public health threat (Bamber et al, 1993).

Following the implementation of the 1908 Act, many brothels and sex workers refused to comply with the law and there were a number of women who worked illegally outside of the houses, often soliciting clients in places where gambling was taking place. The law was laxly enforced and in time became relatively ineffective in controlling brothels and prostitution.

The United Nation’s focus on trafficking and prostitution eventually required the Thai government to reevaluate the policy regulating the sex industry. Although real changes to legislation were not made until 1960, from the late 1930s Thailand began experiencing pressure from international forces to adopt a more restrictive stance on prostitution (Bamber et al, 1993). It was the League of Nations deliberations on prostitution in 1936 that first prompted Thailand to start reconsidering its ineffective prostitution policy (Jeffrey, 2002) and discourses in western countries in relation to prostitution and the (racialized) moral panic around the ‘white slave trade’ prompted international debates around trafficking. International campaigns trying to protect white, western women who might be entrapped in

prostitution led to a host of efforts trying to eradicate prostitution in Western Europe and the United States, and eventually beyond. Kempadoo notes: 'The early international definition of trafficking, as exclusively attached to activities in the global sex trade, lead to the 1949 United Nations Convention for the Suppression of Traffick in Persons and the Exploitation of Prostitution of Others' (2005: xi). International concerns around trafficking in Asian countries reached a crescendo in the late 1950s as the United Nations launched investigations into prostitution in several Southeast Asian countries. Thailand faced increased pressure as their policy on prostitution was seen as particularly lax, and by 1956 steps were being taken to amend strategies for dealing with the sex industry (Jeffrey, 2002).

Succumbing to the pressure from international organizations, Thailand reviewed its legislation on the sex industry and in 1960 prostitution was declared officially illegal, with the implementation of the Prostitution Suppression Act (PSA). Boonchalaski and Guest note that: 'Under the Prostitution Suppression Act prostitution was defined as the act of promiscuously rendering sexual services for remuneration; and prostitutes, as well as all who are involved in arranging or profiting from the act... were liable for punishment' (1998:163). Under this Act the only party *not* subject to prosecution was the (male) customer. Truong notes that the Act 'protects the customer according to the tradition which recognizes men as having a legitimate right to buy sexual satisfaction' (Truong, 1990: 155). The legislation was generally meant to curb trafficking, curtail the sex industry, and sought to 'reform' female sex workers; these reforms included provisions for medical treatment, training and suggestions that convicted sex workers would be 'committed to an assistance center for a period not exceeding one year from the day the person has satisfied the sentence of the court [and will] be penalized if they seek to flee the centre' (Boonchalaski and Guest, 1998:163).

International forces had an important impact on the Thai sex trade until the late 1950s in two ways: firstly with 'modernizing' reforms that initially addressed issues of slavery in the sex industry and secondly with the United Nation's push to curtail prostitution and trafficking

globally. Had these external pressures been applied consistently over the next few years/decades, it is possible that the sex industry may not have developed in Thailand in the way it did; however, by the mid 1960s a war had begun in Vietnam, and with it there emerged an encouragement for the growth of prostitution. Indeed the origination of a large scale tourist sex industry has been linked to the investments made by the United States in Thailand, specifically the development of R&R resorts for the US military<sup>21</sup>, established by the US government in the 1960s for US soldiers stationed in and near Thailand; and later for those on leave from the Vietnam War (Truong, 1990). Jeffrey notes that:

In the 1960s the number of prostitutes began to expand rapidly, from approximately 20,000 women working in the trade in the late 1950s to 171,000 persons “clearly engaged in prostitution related activity” by 1964. 37 Almost all analyses of the prostitution situation in Thailand today point to the arrival of American servicemen in increasingly large numbers in the 1960s as the reason behind the enormous growth of the prostitution industry (Jeffrey, 2002:37).

American soldiers’ R &R breaks became a major source of income for the Thai government, and allowed for financial growth while at the same time making important political alliances with the US. Truong notes: ‘In 1967 it was estimated that the spending of US military personnel on R & R leave in Thailand came to US\$ 5 million. In 1970 this amount rose to around US\$ 20 million, or as much as one-fourth of the total value of rice exports for that year’ (Truong,1990: 161). The US servicemen on R&R breaks would bring financial growth to Thailand, but their activities would also start to raise the profile of Thailand within the international community.

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the Lonely Planet 1997 guide writes that Patpongphanit, the owner of Patpong, says that it was not American servicemen who supported Patpong, ‘but rather airline staff from some 15 airline offices which established themselves in the area after WWII’ (LP, 1997:282). Unfortunately no reference was given to this assertion, so it is difficult to assess the validity of the claim.

Indeed, Thailand's image as a sex tourist destination started to become popularized in international discourses around this time period, particularly in America as servicemen were being entertained in Thai R&R facilities. Bishop and Robinson (1998) provide an insightful account of American interpretations of Thailand in popular culture, and their analysis of articles in the *New Yorker* magazine from the 1950s suggests that Thailand was described as laid back and festive with Thai people portrayed as friendly and easy-going and Thai women as beautiful; there was no mention of prostitution and nothing to suggest that there might be a sex industry of any kind. By the late 1960s, however, the sex industry becomes part of the journalistic representation of Thailand. American GIs were in full party mode and with this militaristic engagement with the sex industry the *New Yorker* begins to cover this shifting relationship, noting the increasing profile of the sex industry and its links to the military in 1967: 'much, if not most of the conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption [of the sex industry] here would vanish at once if the American servicemen left' (Shaplen in Bishop and Robinson, 1998:36).

However, the sex industry did not simply disappear after the US troops left the beaches and brothels in Patpong and Pattaya in the mid-1970s. Thailand's government encouraged the growth of the sex industry, 'as it built up the tourist industry on the basis of the infrastructure developed for the American military. The bars, nightclubs, and massage parlors built to entertain visiting American military personnel became part of a vast network of tourism-targeted infrastructural development' (Jeffrey, 2002: 38). Contracts were made with the US government as R&R sites were developed across regions in Thailand, including well-known beach areas such as Pattaya (Enloe, 1989). However, the support of the sex industry by the US and Thai governments meant that the restrictive legislation around prostitution needed to be revised to more easily facilitate R&R sites.

In 1966 (as more and more US servicemen started to venture onto Thai shores for R&R breaks) the Entertainment Places Act (EPA) came into effect. There was still a considerable

amount of international pressure being applied globally to try to control and eradicate prostitution, so it would have been difficult for Thailand to simply legalize or decriminalize the trade without facing sanctions. As such, the EPA, which *seemed* to further control venues that encouraged or allowed commercial sex, actually enabled the growth of the sex industry. Boonchalaski and Guest note: ‘The [1966 EPA] Act regulates nightclubs, dance halls, bars and places for baths, massage, or steam baths which have women to attend to male customers’ (1998:163). All entertainment venues needed to be licensed and the selling of sex was strictly prohibited. However, Manderson (1992) suggests that the effect of the EPA was not to curtail the industry, but rather to move it to other venues that were less obvious; rather than having brothels with a lantern marking them out, tea houses, massage parlors, nightclubs and hair dressers became the new venues for selling sex. The EPA helped make the sex industry more diffuse, with sex workers no longer having to register with the state, and brothels no longer having to mark themselves out. Truong notes that:

Legally, women working in this industry are expected to provide only ‘special services’, a known euphemism for prostitutes’ services. In practice, ‘special services’ are left open to the customers’ request and customers are exempt from penalty. Thus, while the existence of prostitution is legally suppressed and deformed, entertainment places (pimping) became formalized to protect owners and customers (Truong, 1990:156).

The result of the EPA was the international community was satisfied that the legislation appeared to limit the sex industry, but in actual fact prostitution was allowed to flourish and the sex industry grew and expanded to meet the demand of the US servicemen who had been stationed in the Asian region, as well as Thai (male) customers (Enloe, 1989; Manderson, 1992; Jeffrey, 2002).

The influx of US soldiers had a profound effect on the Thai economy in several ways. Ara Wilson (2004) suggests that Thailand began to develop as a capitalist economy in the post World War II era, using 'a laissez-faire capitalist path to economic growth that encouraged foreign investment, industrialization, and tourism, with relatively few regulations' (2004: 19). Tourism, as an economic strategy, became increasingly important to Thailand following the post-Vietnam War era; the US government in the 1960s and 70s felt that developing tourism (particularly in Southeast Asia) could help with the peace process (i.e. stemming the spread of communism in the Cold War battle). Thailand was seen as a region of stability in comparison to other unstable (and sometimes communist) countries nearby, and with the R&R facilities already in place investments in Thailand (and ostensibly in the Thai sex industry) were seen as desirable.

After his visit in 1971, Robert McNamara, who was then head of the World Bank, suggested that Thailand had a reasonably ready-made tourist industry, and tourism investment would be advantageous to Thailand's developing economy. McNamara had been the US Secretary of Defense in 1967 in charge of overseeing the original R&R contracts in Thailand, and in the 1970s he helped establish Thailand's 'special' tourism policy. Bishop and Robinson argue that 'the special kind of tourism envisaged was virtually a foregone conclusion' (1998:98), and further suggest that the target of travel to Thailand was the single male - largely because the sex industry was already firmly established.

During the 1970s tourism and sex tourism became seen as both a strategy for the propagation of peace in potentially unstable regions, and the economic and structural development of poor countries, and the sex industry started to become part of Thailand's economic and cultural landscape (Bishop and Robinson, 1998). The promotion of international tourism had an important impact on the economic development of Thailand, but a number of other factors worked in combination with these to help to produce the sex tourism industry for which Thailand is so well-known. With the backing of organizations like the World Bank and the

support from the US government, US companies began making investments and lending money to Thai developers and entrepreneurs, further stimulating the economy. The investments made in Thailand helped create partnerships between the tourism industry and ‘the masters of the sex industry’ (1998:9).

Bishop and Robinson note the representations of Thailand that came into effect during the 1960s and 1970s would have an impact on the way Thailand was understood (as a sexualized destination) for decades to come. They argue: ‘Representations of the Thai character and culture- especially as regards sexuality- and, eventually, of the sex industry are all “prehistory” in that they predate the enormous increase in American media coverage of Thailand and its commercial sex work... The media prehistory created a set of themes and variations that constituted the meaning of “Thailand” in the Western imagination for more than forty years’ (1998:43). Western interpretations of Thailand combined with the cultural and economic factors that were already in motion helped to cement the sex industry as a market ready-made for foreign customers.

Indeed, by the 1970s, and the representation of Thailand in the western media helped to further popularize the tourist-oriented sex industry in Bangkok. Thailand’s image as an exotic/erotic destination was also portrayed in pop culture. When *Emmanuelle* opened in Paris in 1974, it set an all-time box record in France (Ross, 2007). The erotic (some would say pornographic) film features a French diplomat’s wife learning to accept a more ‘natural’ state of sexuality, and features Thailand as the stage of the sexually permissive ‘education’. The official movie poster for the film displays the lead character Emmanuelle (played by Sylvia Kristel) topless and seductively positioned with her legs spread. While the focus of the film is squarely on the sexual lessons that European Emmanuelle must learn, Thailand and Thai people are represented in the film as exotic/erotic background characters. Thai men are portrayed as rampant and sometimes violent sexual Others, and there is a famous scene at a Bangkok ping pong show where a Thai woman smokes a cigarette with her vagina for a

largely white, male (tourist/expatriate) audience. So while the film may be about a white French woman coming to know her own sexual limits, the fact that Thailand (and specifically Bangkok) is the background for the film is a critical component of the movie and helped to set Thailand as space where sexual encounters are normal and indeed, natural (Manderson, 1997).

Magazines in the US started to highlight the growing 'sleaze' problem in Thailand, and highlighted shocking stories about teenage girls are kept in harems that could be bought relatively cheaply. By the mid-1970s shows like NBC's *Weekend* provided audiences with titillating but blurry images of the famous ping pong shows, which interestingly coincided with the World Bank's regeneration tourism plan for Thailand and its promotion as an exotic vacation site for western tourists. Bishop and Robinson note that: 'In this context, if *Weekend*... sent any message, it was that something raunchy was happening in Bangkok, and the only way to see it for yourself was to see it for yourself' (1998:38). The promotion of sex tourism had a major impact on the growth of the sex industry, and also on tourist numbers to the region. Jeffrey notes that by 1974 'over 20,000 entertainment places had been established nationwide (including bars, nightclubs, and brothels). Increasingly, these places were being used not only by servicemen but also by visiting tourists, the numbers rising from 80,000 foreign tourists to Thailand in 1960 to nearly three million by 1986' (2002: 39).

Investments in infrastructures from the mid-late 1970s through the 1980s related to tourism were increased, with airports, roads, and hotels receiving money for development from international investors. The hotel sector became an important contributor to the maintenance and growth of the sex industry. Truong (1990) notes that competition with bigger hotel chains forced smaller hotels to provide a variety of services to help increase their revenues and stay solvent. During the R&R period, many hotels had started to let rooms by the hour, and some even included 'personal services' as part of their packages (i.e. providing female prostitutes to customers along with the room) and these practices continued into the 1980s.

As these practices became the norm, bigger hotels were forced to provide similar services ‘particularly since the rate of accumulation by hotels accommodating prostitution is very high’ (Truong, 1990:170).

Furthermore, tour operators and hotel management companies earn an enormous profit when occupancy rates are high, and many tour operators started to provide complete ‘sex packages’ for male travelers in the 1980s. Truong suggests that ‘the relationship between tourism and prostitution...[is] related to the internal structure of the tourist industry and to vested interests of a financial nature’ (1990:172). The Thai government’s approach to the development of a tourist-oriented sex industry helped to entrench sex tourism as part of the larger tourist market and the Thai government understood (and indeed promoted) tourism/sex tourism as a viable economic development strategy. Several government officials in the 1980s including a deputy premier, exhorted provinces to encourage sex tourism as a way to stimulate local economies (Bishop and Robinson, 1998) and images of Thai women were used by the state to promote tourism to Thailand (Jeffrey, 2002).

Images of Thailand as sexualized continued to be propagated in the west through the 1970s and 1980s, and Thailand’s reputation as an international sex tourist destination continued to grow. As tourism revenues continued to climb, the Thai government continued to promote the sex industry as part of its wider tourism campaign. The blatant promotion reached its peak in 1987 when the official government agency for tourism in Thailand, the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) launched a successful ‘Visit Thailand Year’, ostensibly aimed at encouraging male sex tourists to visit the country. The first page of the international press packet (intended to promote the campaign) invokes images of Thailand as female, sensual, and delicious- and talks about Thailand’s vibrant and legendary nightlife. The sex industry was obviously promoted during this important tourism campaign, and tourism figures surged 23%, putting visitor numbers up to over 3 million (Tourism Thailand, undated). Visitor profiles from 1986-1987 estimated that 66% of tourist visitors were men between the ages of 25 and 54 (Bishop

and Robinson, 1998). TAT brochures continued to promote Thailand as an exotic/erotic paradise for years after, with even the 1995 official tourism brochure focusing on the erotic pleasures that were to be found in Bangkok (Bishop and Robinson, 1998). The Thai government, along with advertisers and tour promoters, worked to enhance the image of Thailand as a (male) sex tourist destination; this type of tourism promotion put the sex industry firmly on the tourist map, and Thailand's image as a sex tourist haven became further entrenched.

### **Shifting discourses on sex tourism**

From the 1960s to the 1990s tourism to Thailand continued to grow and the perceived importance of the sex industry ensured the development and expansion of the sex tourist trade in Thailand during this time period. It is important to bear in mind that this expansion is linked to the expansion of the tourist sector more broadly, as generally speaking tourism in Thailand was lucrative. Truong notes:

In absolute terms the growth of the tourist industry has been spectacular. Earning from tourism rose from 200 million baht in 1960 to over 37 billion baht in 1986... Compared to other major commodities, tourism has been since the mid1970s the major foreign exchange earner, overtaking rice in 1982 (Truong, 1990:165).

The income from tourism accounted for 5% of Thailand's GDP in 1991 (Boonchalaski and Guest, 1998) and tourism provided a large number of jobs in the service and hospitality sector (hotels, restaurants, travel operators, etc.), but also in the sex industry.

However, the 1990s brought about a number of social and health related issues that were to have an impact on the way prostitution and sex tourism were talked about in the Thai context.

HIV/AIDS and child prostitution<sup>22</sup> were two key issues that prompted (or perhaps pushed) Thailand to reconsider its promotion of sex tourism (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Kempadoo, 2005). Issues around HIV and child sex tourism became increasingly publicized in the 1990s, and Thailand's sex industry became a focal point for several of these discussions. The international news media began highlighting the problems that sex workers in Thailand faced. In 1993 the BBC produced a documentary, *Dying for Sex*, which showed the evils of sex tourism including the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, and linked prostitution to poverty and exploitation. Indeed, the global panic about the HIV epidemic often focused on 'deviants', including gay men and sex workers, and the effects of HIV on the sex industry in Thailand were cause for international concern. Petras and Wongchaisuwan, in their 1993 article, argue that:

Aids has reached epidemic proportions, spreading rapidly...In December 1988, researchers found that 17.3 percent of brothel prostitutes nationwide carried the HIV virus. By June 1998 the figure had increased to 26 per cent. In June 1989, 3 per cent of Bangkok's brothel prostitutes were found to be infected, by December, the figure had increased to 20.4 per cent...In 1990, an estimated 40 per cent of child prostitutes nationwide and 60 per cent of child prostitutes in the north were infected with HIV (Petras and Wongchaisuwan, 1993: 441).

In a country with such a well-publicized sex industry, Thailand became the focus of the HIV/AIDS scare.

Hall (1998) suggests that the impact of AIDS and the increased activities of groups such as ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children) meant that a more concerted effort was made to highlight and address issues related to the sex industry in Southeast Asian countries. This media and NGO effort highlighted concerns

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<sup>22</sup> These issues will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

about sex tourism in Thailand and the negative press had an impact on Thailand's sense of national honor: '...in 1993 there were three instances in which international attention was focused on Thailand's sex industry. On all three occasions the government made official protests'. These protests were seen in some part as a way to protect Thailand's image, 'but there was also obvious concern that the stories would affect tourism and foreign investment (Boonchalaski and Guest, 1998: 137). Thailand was again put under pressure, and dealing with a number of competing concerns: while sex tourism was in some ways seen as an economic solution to economic development problems, there was growing awareness about the sometimes exploitative nature of these types of engagements, and the HIV/AIDS crisis brought these to the public arena.

The 1990s also saw the organization of women and men working in the sex industry, as a concerted effort was made to fight for sex workers' rights. Sex workers had organized an important meeting in 1985, The International Congress of Whores, where they drafted a charter setting out the rights of those working in the sex industry. The Congress brought sex workers from around the world together in one place, and the meeting helped to cement the organization of sex workers globally (Chapkis, 1997). The 1990s saw many of these groups gain strength and momentum, and at the UN's 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in 1995, prostitution and trafficking were key items on the international agenda. Further conferences organized in the 1990s helped to develop and strengthen the sex workers rights' agenda and publicized the exploitative conditions within the sex industry. NGOs working on prostitution in Thailand (such as *EMPOWER*) gained recognition for their work with sex workers and sex workers' rights were placed on the national policy agenda.

Cultural representations of Thailand reflected this more critical shift, and films such as Dennis O'Rourke's 1991 *The Good Woman of Bangkok* highlighted the scale and nature of the Thai sex industry. O'Rourke's personal journey with a Thai sex worker in Bangkok was filmed and presented as a documentary about the real world of prostitution. O'Rourke shot

numerous scenes of his 'girlfriend' Aoi, talking about her life as a prostitute in Bangkok and also included footage from go-go bars where naked Thai women dance and drunken male sex tourists talk about the reasons they visit Thailand. The film caused a furor amongst academics and cultural commentators who saw the film as exploitative, but the tension created a publicity machine that raised the profile of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* and also highlighted the darker machinations of the sex tourist scene in Thailand.

Thailand's image as a seedy, sex tourist destination was, by the 1990s, creating a good deal of negative publicity. In the wake of this negative attention the TAT developed a more strategic approach to the promotion and marketing of the sex industry. While the development of the international tourist sex trade would have been impossible without the implicit sanction from the Thai government (Truong, 1990; Phongpaichit, 1993), by the 1990s Thai businesses and officials were more ambivalent about the blatant promotion of sex tourism:

Thai politicians and businessmen face a dilemma. While they are aware that the sex industry is an important tourist attraction for some individuals, they also perceive that too much focus on prostitution could depress other segments of the tourist market. Consequently, indirect promotion of the sex industry, coupled with public denial of the size of the industry, have gone hand in hand (Bishop and Robinson, 1998:138).

By the mid-1990s the promotion of the tourist-oriented sex industry was tempered and more attempts were made by the Thai government to stem the rates of the HIV infections through promoting safe sex practices, and they made great efforts to crack down on child sex tourism. This change in approach was manifested in 1996, as the previous legislation on prostitution was replaced by the Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act (PPSA) which is still in effect today. The PPSA stipulates that prostitution is illegal but the fines for prostitutes are much smaller and instead focuses on dealing with those who entice women into the sex industry. Boonchalaski and Guest note: 'While the prostitutes are liable only to fines, those

found guilty of procurement, trafficking, pimping, advertising or soliciting, including the media, are punishable by a prison term and heavier fines' (1998:164). Stronger sentences are imposed for those who force a person into prostitution, and a good deal of emphasis is placed on the suppression and prevention of trafficking. As well, the eradication of child prostitution is one of the central aims of the PPSA.

By the early-2000s, the threat of HIV/AIDS has dwindled in media discourses. Thailand's successful efforts throughout the 1990s and early 2000s to stem HIV infections helped build its reputation as a leader in HIV/AIDS prevention, which in turn has helped keep the sex tourism industry strong (Doskoch, 2009). Furthermore, Thailand have worked with groups like ECPAT to deal with the issue of child prostitution:

...the [Thai] government is trying to reverse the image of Thailand as a haven for sex tourists and paedophiles. In 1996, it identified the trafficking of children for sexual purposes as a priority issue and framed a national policy and action plan to prevent it. In 1999, together with NGOs and intergovernmental organisations, the government came up with a...[strategy] meant to aid police officers in filing charges against those suspected of trafficking offences and protecting victims. More recently, child protection officers have been monitoring offences against minors in Pattaya, and carrying out awareness-raising campaigns to encourage people to report abuses to a new hotline number (ECPAT, undated).

This work has meant that, while some of the stigma the sex industry faced in the 1990s remains, it has lessened somewhat as two of the main issues are being 'dealt with' by the Thai government.

However, representations of Thailand as sexualized are still very much present in contemporary popular culture, and some recent cultural works on Thailand have focused on

Thai female sex workers. Michel Houellebecq's book *Platform* depicts Thailand as a sex tourist paradise with Thai women dedicated to fulfilling the sexual fantasies of western tourists. Robert, a character in the novel, reacts to a female character's enquiries about women working in the sex industry in Pattaya:

'So is it true you've paid for girls?' she asked gently. Her tone was intrigued, devoid of any real reproach. 'They're not as poor as all that, these girls,' added Robert. 'They can afford mopeds and clothes, some of them even have their tits done. It's not cheap getting your tits done. It's true they help their parents out, too,' he concluded thoughtfully (Houellebecq, 2002:52).

Here, Thai sex workers are not victims of the sex industry, nor hapless girls exploited by ridiculous sex tourists; they are financial beneficiaries of the sex industry, able to afford transportation and clothing. Houellebecq presents Thailand as a place where anyone can have their sexual desires met by sexy Thai girls who are '...the best lovers in the world' (2002:53). Even the front cover of the novel depicts the body of a half naked Thai woman while another Thai woman looks on in the background. Here Thai (female) bodies become the main visual image for this sexually charged but critically respected novel.

Director Thomas Clay's film *Soi Cowboy* was officially presented at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard category. The film is described by Adam Dawtry in *Variety* magazine as such:

The film stars Danish actor Nicolas Bro as a corpulent European living in Bangkok with his pregnant Thai girlfriend, whom he met in the notorious nightclub district Soi Cowboy. She seeks commitment from him to avoid falling back into the red-light life, while a parallel plotline involves her gangster brother, employed to deliver their older brother's head (Dawtry, 2008)

The Thai sex worker in the film is presented as grasping, greedy, and solely concerned about her financial situation in contrast to her lover who is portrayed rather sympathetically. While the film did not win any prizes, its entry into such a prestigious and internationally renowned festival means that here again is a presentation of the sex industry in Thailand and sex tourism again as a relatively normal part of Thai culture.

Less 'highbrow' entertainment also works to position the sex industry as a natural facet of Thai culture. Take for example the character Ting Tong in *Little Britain*, a sketch show on the BBC; in 2004 the show reached over 2 million viewers (Broadcast Now, 2004) with the BBC press office describing the sketch scenario as such:

On the Mike McShane estate in Bruise, Dudley is excitedly looking forward to the arrival of his new bride, Ting Tong Macadangdang, loving [sic] chosen from his 'Thai Brides For You' brochure. However, when she arrives, Ting Tong does not quite match the picture in the brochure. In fact she could be prosecuted under the Trade Descriptions Act. Incensed Dudley orders Ting Tong to leave, but with some subtle persuasion she convinces him she can stay, just for one night... (BBC, 2005).

Of course this 'subtle persuasion' comes in the form of sexual favors and Ting Tong eventually moves her Thai family members over the England as she continues her sexual services to her husband. While many of the sketches in *Little Britain* are generally irreverent and mock a number of (vulnerable) social groups, the portrayal of the hypersexual mail order bride from Thailand again positions Thai women as sexual and deviant and sex tourism as a harmless exchange between two invested parties.

These various textual/photographic/celluloid representations of Thailand as exotic and Thai people as sexual/erotic create an image that positions Thailand as an exotic space and Thai

people as ‘naturally’ sexual. These popular cultural illustrations demonstrate the pervasiveness of the sexualized iconography associated with Thai culture. These contemporary popular cultural references seem to mark Thailand as a sexualized space and work to highlight the sexual nature of the destination, and at the same time work to normalize sexual encounters with hyper-sexual Thai people.

The next section will argue that a nuanced understanding of the sex industry must be taken into account when considering processes of sex tourism and will look at the way the sex industry is presented in cultural guides and guidebooks. The development of the tourist and sex tourist industry is impacted by eroticized representations of Thai culture and images, texts, and media portrayals of Thailand work to highlight sexualized spaces/places/peoples as part of the sex industry. Guides position tourists as voyeurs as they invite westerners to visit the sexual spaces as part of their authentic experience of Thailand.

### **Representation of the Sex industry in Guides to Thailand**

#### **Placing Thailand**

Bishop and Robinson (1998) highlight media representations of Thailand from the 1960s onward to suggest that Thailand’s projected image in popular culture may influence tourists’ perception of Thai customs and cultures and help direct the tourist gaze towards sexualized arenas. Lenore Manderson supports this assertion and notes that ‘the anticipation of place and experience by the tourist which is created and sustained by media representations, and the construction of the gaze through signs’ (1995: 307) is relevant for tourist consumption of the sex industry. She argues that ‘in the case of Thailand, the gaze is constructed through select images taken to constitute “real Thailand”...[tourists] are able to locate, associate, imagine, and replicate the experience, and to collapse the journey into singular emblematic acts: hence

“going to Bangkok” becomes a euphemism or substitution for “going to a live sex show” (Manderson, 1995: 307-308).

The representation of Thailand in guidebooks is also significant as what tourists read and see in travel guides influences what they understand to be normal tourist activities in a particular setting. Oppermann et al (1998) argue that local people are often represented in tourism brochures in either a sexualized or a romanticized manner while Bishop and Robinson (1998) have suggested that travel guides and advertising often associate the natural beauty of the Thai landscape with that of Thai women, noting that ‘Tourist advertising and the abundant literature of travel extol [Thailand’s] beauty and associate the “natural” with the primitive, the exotic, the mysterious, and the erotic- not an undifferentiated eroticism but one that shares the characteristics of the Thai women as represented in the tourist discourse’ (1998:111). Some academic authors looking at the development of the sex industry have suggested that advertising campaigns by foreign travel agencies intentionally heighten the idea of the sexually available Thai woman and promote the idea of the exoticized, sexualized Other (Enloe, 1989; Truong, 1990; Jeffrey, 2002) while other academic authors have highlighted the problematic representation of Thailand in guidebooks (Bishop and Robinson, 1998).

Guidebooks play a critical role in directing tourists’ attention towards certain objects/people. Tourist guidebooks function as markers of sights and help to focus and direct the tourist gaze and thus shape the tourist experience. A key component of the tourist experience lies in the way it is shaped by the broader tourist industry: ‘...it is through symbols and meanings that tourists develop a particular perspective, or a way of looking at people, places, and things, that is fundamentally different from the way non-tourists see them....the tourist’s first contact with a sight is often not the sight itself, but a representation of it, a marker’ (Jacobs, 2001:311). This markedness points to a place/site as being a sight of importance, and guidebooks work to focus the attention of the tourist on particular landscapes/people as a sight/site that will facilitate for the tourist an ‘authentic’ tourist experience. Jacobs argues

that these markers that help frame the sight might include ‘newspapers and magazine articles, advertisements, postcards, brochures, internet websites and guidebooks’ (Jacobs, 2001:312). While popular cultural references help to give tourists some ideas about what Thailand might be like, guidebooks and tourist brochures provide a more specific outline of what to see and do- they provide detailed markers for tourists wanting to explore the ‘real’ Thailand.

Sex tourism has become entrenched in Thailand’s economic and social fabric, and the sex industry has been promoted as an authentic part of Thai culture by both the Thai government and the tourism industry; this sexualized image of Thailand has seeped into western discourses and impacted Thailand’s international image. The western imagining of Thailand as an exotic/erotic destination seems to have influenced the way that guides and guidebooks portray Thailand and situate the sex industry as both real Thailand and a normal part of Thai culture. The positioning of the sex industry as both real and authentic will be important for discussions on tourist motivations to see the sex industry in Chapter Four.

### **Guides to Thailand**

Bishop and Robinson suggest that ‘Guidebooks and travel brochures... actively prompt their reader to visit and tour the destination they tout’ (1998:76). However, guidebooks do more than simply point tourists to a destination; guidebooks point to specific cultural sites and experiences and play an important part in determining what counts as authentic or worth seeing in a given destination. Guidebooks play a critical role in the way that tourists interact with their holiday destination: ‘guidebooks play a major role in constructing the tourist experience and making it meaningful’ (Jacobs, 2001:324).

Buzinde et al suggest that what tourists go on to see as part of their ‘tourist experience’ depends on the ‘pictorial representation and interpretation of cultural others, which re-affirm stereotypes instead of breaking them down’ (2006: 708). Further, the authors claim that

tourism advertising and promotional material '(un)wittingly reproduces these ethnic, gendered, and age related stereotypes and their parallel limiting roles (2006:708). These media representations 'invoke expectations that affect how a certain social segment (whether ethnic minority or majority, locals or tourists) is perceived, interpreted, and treated' (Buzinde et al, 2006: 709). The authors suggest that the images and representations of ethnic/racial Others must be considered as a means of power: 'pictorial portrayals continue to depict stereotypical ethnic/racial and class distinctions. Indeed representations of people, regarding who they are and where they belong, have continued to be a powerful element of the sociocultural, economic, and political relations that form society' (2006: 711). These stereotypes presented in tourism literatures turn local people into symbols, they come to represent an authentic 'third world' culture, they come to represent a stereotyped local culture, and traditions become essentialized and commodified.

In Thailand the sex industry becomes marked out as a tourist 'must see'; guides to Thailand mark and shape the tourist gaze and exploring to what extent the sex industry is normalized in the texts and the pictures that point to the 'real' Thailand can help to situate tourists' behaviors. In this sense, guidebooks also work to focus the 'tourist gaze' on particular spaces/people. Cheong and Miller argue that guidebooks mediate a directive gaze that is related not only to individual desires to see certain sights, but also to broader power relations that link to tourism systems/institutions:

...instances of power relationships are located in the seemingly nonpolitical business and banter of tourists and guides...in the design and use of guidebooks, and so on. Tourism systems are sustained by the gaze at the individual level and by productive effects of power at the institutional level (2000:378).

As many tourists access information about destinations through guidebooks, tourists are often dependent on tour guide publishers for details about which particular places/spaces are worth

visiting. As well, package tourists are often dependent on their tour guides for information about the holiday destination. However even the seemingly independent realm of the self-guided tourist ‘...shows the movements of tourists limited and structured by the guidebook, the agent or the signpost. To differing extents, then, tourists are power-bound and are influenced...from the time they first seek information and make travel plans until they return home’ (Cheong and Miller, 2000:381). Cheong and Miller do not see the tourist as the active agent here, but rather as a passive receiver of information and detail provided by the tourism industry. They argue that ‘...while tourists do acquire a gaze, agent-target power relations guarantee that it is the “touristic gaze” of agents that manufacture the sociological gaze of tourists...’ (2002:383). In this sense then, tourists are targets of the industry- they do indeed gaze, but this gaze is nearly imposed upon them by tour guides, tourist literature, guidebooks, etc: ‘They influence what tourists can and cannot do, where they can and cannot go, and what they select and reject’ (Cheong and Miller, 2000:383). Travel publishers are not neutral, but rather encourage tourists to ‘function in a certain way’ (Cheong and Miller, 2000:381) and guidebooks work to situate specific places/people as culturally important or symbolic. Indeed, tourist guidebooks have ‘become the most influential in the construction of the tourist gaze and the interpretation of various sites’ (Jacobs, 2001:312).

*Expert knowledges of the sex industry: Cultural guides*

To some extent this is also down to the ways that travel guide authors are positioned as cultural ‘experts’. Cultural guides are particularly guilty of promoting authors as experts in Thailand and Thai culture. Cultural guides usually provide a more in-depth picture of a particular destination, and are aimed at giving western readers a chance to ‘look behind the appearances, and to reveal the ways Thais perceive and handle their social life’ (Mulder, 1996: back cover jacket). Cultural guides give interested westerners the ‘real deal’ about Thailand, providing more historical and social details than a normal travel guide might. These books often straddle popular culture and academic text- with the authors usually having

some kind of academic or journalistic background. Dr. Niels Mulder, for example, the author of *Inside Thai Society* is presented as an anthropologist and specialist in Southeast Asia and has written a variety of cultural books on Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. *Very Thai*, another cultural guide, is written by English-born Philip Cornwel-Smith. He is described as an expert on Thailand, having written for various travel guides, and a resident in Bangkok:

Philip never expected to live in Thailand for over a decade. He'd been in the capital only four days before becoming the founding editor of its first international-standard city listings magazine, Bangkok Metro, which he helmed until 2002...Throughout his time in Thailand, Philip has organized events, from film festivals and dance productions to themed parties and award ceremonies... Among the other publications Philip's edited or contributed to are Thailand: A Traveller's Companion, Eyewitness: Thailand guidebook, Lonely Planet's World Food: Thailand and the city's first mobile phone guide for Nokia (2005: inside jacket).

Cornwel-Smith is positioned as someone who knows about the real Thailand and is prepared to tell you the secrets that most westerners do not get the chance to access. Another so-called cultural expert, Bob Cooper, is described as a 'sociologist' on the back cover of his 1982 book *Culture Shock! Thailand-* which 'sparkles with wit, perception, and little sidelights' (Cooper and Cooper, 1982, back cover jacket). Here is an expert on Thailand with sociological credentials, and the co-author, his Thai wife, writing an 'enlightening guide to Thai behavior' (Cooper and Cooper, 1982, back cover jacket).

Guidebooks and cultural guides to Thailand work incredibly hard to give the impression that the authors directing tourists are indeed experts. The authors have a working knowledge of Thailand and are prepared to share their knowledge of the people, places, and cultural customs that would otherwise be difficult for tourists to access.

Having established that the authors to guidebooks and cultural guides have some kind of expert knowledge, these well-traveled writers are then able to write with some authority about the nature of real Thailand. The sex industry is a topic of discussion in most of these tourist manuals, and *Inside Thai Society* deals specifically with the issue of prostitution in Thailand. Mulder writes:

To sell one's body to non-intimate distant persons is merely relating to the world outside and does not imply any feelings of loyalty or respect. Buying or selling sex is a monetary transaction like any other, and money is widely admired. Neither party is personally involved; it is simply a business transaction in which the loss-of-face element is amply compensated by money. To be the minor wife...or mistress of a rich man is to be under his patronage, and his status, power, and wealth reflect on her. It is an honorable, much sought-after status, particularly for women of a distinctly lower social level (Mulder, 1996:71).

Prostitution is presented here as a financial situation that harms no one and, in particular, brings prestige to poor working class women. It seems rather innocuous. Mulder suggests that selling sex is a simple financial interaction between two equal parties, and nobody 'loses face' so long as money is made from the exchange. He argues that 'Prostitutes cash in on the ambiguous cultural values of prestige, power, and money...When she [the prostitute] has accumulated enough or when her fortunes turn, she may return to her village or origin to marry and be accepted with little or no stigma' (1996:71)<sup>23</sup>. Guides such as this work not only to position the sex industry as normal, but to deproblematize sexual exchanges between (western) men and Thai prostitutes. By reducing prostitution to a simple financial exchange that is a normal part of Thai culture, it gives readers the impression that commercial sexual

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<sup>23</sup> Research conducted by Peracca et al (1998) suggests that female prostitutes who return to their villages often find it difficult to marry a local man and do face some stigma from other villagers.

transactions are not exploitative and ignores any disparity in power that might exist between Thai women selling sex and the (western) men buying it. Mulder's interpretation works to give the impression that, because sex work is so 'normal' in Thailand, and so part of the fabric of Thai society, that western tourists who might dabble in prostitution would simply be participating in an activity that is already so widespread and entrenched that their actions are not adding any more harm to the situation.

Like Mulder's work, the writing in *Culture Shock!* also deproblematizes the sex industry: 'Prostitutes lose face and status, but they also make money, which can eventually re-buy many of the superficial daily actions of respect that are essential to a Thai's mental well-being' (Cooper and Cooper, 1982: 31). The authors also explicitly acknowledge the tourist-oriented male market, and note that: 'Many male visitors are likely to spend at least part of their leisure time in the company of some of those Thai women who work in one form or another of prostitution' (Cooper and Cooper, 1982: 31). So prostitution for western (male) tourists is a normal scenario, and Thai sex workers make enough money to apparently offset some of the problems they are likely to face while working in the industry.

In *Very Thai* Cornwel-Smith, well placed to tell us something about Thailand, gives the reader some insight into real Thai culture. He suggests in the introduction that the official culture doled out to tourists is too sanitized: 'Discomfiting subcultures- magic tattoos, mediums, blind buskers, ladyboys, phallic charms, naughty massage- face ever-growing disapproval. Yet often what's most fascinating are the things left unregulated and unabashed' (Cornwel-Smith, 2005: 11). These 'subcultures' may be facing disapproval from some Thai commentators, but the western booksellers and travel guides are working to position these spaces/places as the real Thailand- the authentic Thailand is where the ladyboy shows and massage parlors are. An entire section is devoted to understanding Thai lesbians and transsexuals, while the 'Massage: Ancient techniques for healing and relaxing the body' chapter opens with the sentences: 'Thailand has two massage cultures: clothed and unclothed.

Don't confuse the two. Enter a parlor signed *naud* (massage) expecting nuad paen boran (literally, "ancient massage") and you get, ahem, "young" massage. This might involve ancient techniques, but more likely oil, a towel, soap, and something extra' (2005:95). This humorous analysis of the sex industry helps to remove any stigma that might normally be associated with visiting a massage parlor, and again helps to normalize this type of interaction. Prostitution and sex tourism are mentioned throughout the book, and Cornwell-Smith seems at times to be actively promoting the sex industry, at times to simply cast the sex industry as a 'naughty' side to Thailand that tourists will certainly see, but can take or leave. Again, the 'cultural' insights into Thailand involve demonstrations of the pervasiveness of the sex industry and its natural relationship to western tourists.

*Expert Knowledge of the Sex Industry: Mainstream Guidebooks*

Guidebooks are also guilty of positioning contributing writers as 'experts' but, rather than emphasizing their academic experience, focus on their travel expertise and their knowledge of areas off the normal tourist trail. In a blurb about 'Lonely Planet Authors' in the 2007 *Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand*, the Lonely Planet positions the writers as 'independent, dedicated travelers' who 'don't research using just the internet or the phone...They travel widely to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more- and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is' (Williams et al, 2007:16). The author profiles showcase the researchers/writers- seasoned, adventurous travelers who have braved various dangers (tsunamis, traffic, local food) to see the real Thailand. Most of the mainstream tourist guides (including *Frommer's Thailand*, *Insight Guide Thailand*, *Fodor's Thailand*, *The Rough Guide to Thailand*) provide details about their authors, working to position them as experts to the region as well as seasoned travelers.

Travel guides to Thailand, written by these seasoned explorers, have been available for a mainstream market for decades, and as far back as the 1970s guidebooks were pointing to Patpong, the notorious red light area in Bangkok, as a tourist thoroughfare. In 1979, the *Berlitz Travel Guide to Thailand* makes it clear that the sex industry is part of the ‘tourist attractions’:

Any list of Thailand’s attractions must mention Bangkok’s nightlife, which has achieved a worldwide reputation for its lusty, uncomplicated good humour. Anything, as they say, goes... (Berlitz, 1979: 12-13).

Tourism and sex tourism are presented here as overlapping; the nightlife of Bangkok is simply a tourist attraction, and already Thailand’s ‘worldwide reputation’ as a sexualized destination helps to offset any ambivalence tourists might have about visiting red light areas. The sex industry is mentioned many times in the Berlitz guide; Patpong is presented later in the guide as a notorious yet globally recognized area, where tourists are exhorted to at least see the sex industry as part of a ‘sociological’ study:

The financial and commercial tone of the area [Sukhumvit] is overshadowed by the notoriety of two of its small streets, Patpong I and II. From Munich to Melbourne the name Patpong evokes the image of go-go bars and massage parlours. The streets are privately owned, by the industrialist Patana Pongpanit, hence Patpong for short. As a sociological phenomenon, Patpong ought to be seen if not sampled’ (Berlitz, 1979: 39-40).

Both of these excerpts point to Thailand as a sexualized space, and suggest tourists ‘ought’ to see, ‘if not sample’ the sex industry in Bangkok. Visiting Patpong is positioned as an acceptable pastime for the international tourist in the 1970’s and the distinctly non-

commercial feel of the bars and clubs helps to assuage the seediness that might normally accompany the sex industry:

The Go-Go Scene: Bangkok-by-Night, primarily a man's world, lives up to its reputation. The unabashed sensuality of the girlie bars is mellowed by an almost non-commercial conviviality. The expression "clip joint" would never enter the mind. The go-go dancers actually seem to like their work, they appear pleased to be offered a drink (not exorbitantly priced), and they cheerfully continue to be natural and friendly wherever developments lead (Berlitz, 1979:94).

Thai sex workers here are not only friendly but 'naturally' sexual, and enjoy their work as entertainers. All tourists are welcome to experience the sex industry as part of an authentic experience; indeed the Berlitz Guide argues 'For better or worse, massage parlours have brought as much fame to Thailand as orchids and spired architecture' (1979:94). That sexual massage parlors are on par with orchids and Thai religious architecture (which are well known as traditional or authentic Thai symbols), suggests that all tourists - male or female, straight or gay - can experience this famous form of entertainment.

Nearly a decade later, in the 1988 *Thomas Cook Guide to Thailand* the sex industry in Bangkok is still seen as one option in a range of tourist diversions.

Bangkok... the nightlife is almost legendary and hardly needs any introduction. The choice of activities is wide open and ranges from go-go bars to sophisticated nightclubs, from Thai boxing matches to discos' (Hoskin, 1988, 60).

The sex industry is again positioned as internationally renowned, 'legendary', and available to tourists as one of the many 'activities' one can access whilst in Bangkok.

Later, the guide provides travelers with more details about what to see, giving detailed directions to Patpong and Soi Cowboy. Thomas Cook acknowledges the scale of the sex industry, but suggests that 'Bangkok nightlife' is less seedy than western red light areas, and again removes the stigma of visiting a go-go bar or nightclub by suggesting that 'having a good time' is the main ingredient of the fun-loving Thai sex industry:

Nightlife: Such is the city's reputation that to say "Bangkok nightlife" conjures up images of unbridled sex in most people's minds. The reputation is not ill-founded and Bangkok has a disproportionate number of nightclubs, go-go bars and massage parlours with an estimated 300,000 hostesses, bar girls, and masseuses. And that is not to mention the gay scene. It should be pointed out, however, there is little pathos or seediness surrounding such attractions, certainly nothing to compare with the gross nature of red-light districts in Western cities. In keeping with the Thai character, the idea of *sanuk*, having a good time, predominates, and whatever anyone does is his or her business with no harm to anyone else. The main go-go bar areas are Patpong I and Patpong II, two small streets running between Silom and Suriwongse Roads, and Soi Cowboy, a narrow lane between Sois 21 and 23 off Sukhumvit Road (Hoskin, 1988: 92).

The Thomas Cook guide also provides details for the traveler in Pattaya who wishes to access Thailand's nightlife:

At the southern end of the bay is what used to be the fishing village and is now popularly referred to as "The Strip" [identified on the map as the present-day location of Walking Street]. Crammed into a small space are a jumble of open-air bars, go-go bars, discos, restaurants and shops. This is the nighttime (and much of the daytime) entertainment centre, largely geared to the desires of the single male. Even if this bawdy scene is not to everyone's liking, "The Strip" is worth visiting just to see it as

a phenomenon and indulge in the pleasant pastime of people-watching (Hoskin, 1988: 119).

Both the Berlitz guide and the Thomas Cook guide propose that having a look at bars and clubs located in the sex industry is an experience that tourists should have even if they do not like the 'bawdy scene' they can still indulge in 'pleasant' people-watching or perhaps gather some sociological knowledge about Thai culture.

The 1997 *Guide to Thailand* by Frommer's acknowledges that the sex industry is wrapped up with the rest of the broader tourist industry: 'Although prostitution is illegal, it is as much a part of the tourism industry as superb hotels and stunning beaches' (Bozman, 1997:29). When talking about Patpong, Frommer's notes that:

Bangkok has one of the liveliest nightlife scenes in all Asia, with a range of cultural and hedonistic activities that should satisfy anyone. Most visitors won't leave without a stroll through Patpong, the famous sex strip and Night Market, with myriad vendors and two blocks of bars and clubs (Bozman, 1997:123).

Their suggestion that most visitors will have a look at Patpong before they leave gives the impression that this is a normal part of any tourist excursion in Bangkok- with enough variety to satisfy 'everyone'.

Fodor's guide from the same year (1997) subtitles their edition as 'The Complete Guide to the Exotic Land', highlighting the exoticism of the tourist experience before the book is even opened. They too suggest that tourists go to see the infamous streets of Patpong where go-go bars with prostitutes and sex shows are all on display, but equally, 'Patpong is quite safe and well patrolled by police, and it even has a night market where Thai families shop' (Paulus, 1997:43). Making the sex industry seem like a relatively safe place and an authentic place

where even Thai families go, gives the impression that this is not only a normal place to visit, but one where you might bump up against the real Thai people who are shopping alongside you; it makes Patpong seem like an authentic Thai space. As well, Fodor's mentions Soi Cowboy and Soi Nana as the ideal locations for evening entertainment in all three of its Bangkok days out (i.e. if you have 2 days, 3 days, or 5 days to see Bangkok). Patpong is presented here as an essential, authentic, and cultural experience one should have in Thailand.

However, whilst the many of the guides from the early to mid-1990s present the sex industry as an exotic, erotic space where any tourist can have an exciting adventure, some of the guides present a more censored picture of the tourist-oriented sex industry. Frommer's 1997 guide suggests that the sex industry has become an 'unfortunate' way for poor rural girls to make money, HIV/AIDS features as a problem affecting Thai sex workers, and child sex tourism is briefly acknowledged. It seems possible that the media attention to HIV/AIDS and child prostitution began to impact the nonchalant manner in which the sex industry had previously been presented. However, while Frommer's does acknowledge the exploitative situation of some sex workers, much of the focus/concern is on protecting tourists. Figures for Thai sex workers infected with HIV are provided and tourists are urged to use caution when dealing with female sex workers:

Western embassies report numerous cases of tourists who are drugged in their hotel rooms by the girl of the night, waking two days later to find all their valuables gone. There are a shocking number of stories about young Western travelers found dead in their hotel rooms from unexplained causes. We urge caution in your dealings with strangers. If you use services of commercial sex workers, take proper precautions and wear a latex condom (Bozman, 1997: 30).

Thai sex workers are portrayed here as dangerous, and the threat of HIV/AIDS and physical harm is present and serious. While suggesting that (male) tourists take caution if having sex

with a Thai prostitute, they also seem to acknowledge that this is a common occurrence, one that their readers might partake in. They tell readers that female sex workers can make a lot of money to take back to their homes where they might then 'even get married' (Bozman, 1997:29).

There is an ambivalence here in the position of many of these guidebooks, as they acknowledge that women working in the sex industry face poverty and exploitation, but they also take a prurient position on the sex industry and actively direct tourists to sexual spaces which could still be seen on Frommer's 'Thailand' travel website in 2008. Here one could access a page that discusses Thailand's 'Nightlife'. This modern day travel guide provides useful information about the nightlife in Bangkok. On the website, Frommer's advises travelers about the scene in Patpong:

Most visitors won't leave Bangkok without a stroll around Patpong, the famous sex strip and Night Market with myriad streetside market vendors and blocks of bars and clubs...It's the home of Bangkok's raunchier sex shows, but even if you're not exactly after any risqué entertainment, most visitors come to wander the Market area (lots of knock-off goods and pirate recordings), at least just peak [sic] in the doors of the go-go dens and hit a casual bar or club (Frommers Online, undated).

We can see from the Frommer's website that in 2008, nearly thirty years after the go-go bars of Bangkok were highlighted in the Berlitz guide, Patpong is still being presented as a famous and internationally renowned tourist destination. Tourists can still enjoy the sights of Patpong even if they are not specifically after 'risqué' entertainment, and some guidebooks almost seem to advocate voyeurism, telling potential tourists to take a little 'peek' at the scantily clad sex workers whilst strolling the market for trinkets to take home. Many guides provide information about where to see a ping pong show, and the rules of etiquette in sexual establishments. The Frommer's website tells tourists how to negotiate the 'bar fine' if you

want to take a sex worker home, and where to take your 'new friend' if your posh hotel will not let you in with a prostitute. However, they also warn about the threat of HIV/AIDS and highlight some of the 'downsides' of the sex industry, noting:

AIDS is still a major concern among sex workers, but the tide of new cases has slowed somewhat. Recent crackdowns in Patpong means that some of the raunchier shows and more overt venues for prostitution have closed, but in other cases, the focus has shifted to younger and younger women. The picture certainly isn't rosy... While prostitution is technically illegal in Thailand, this law is never enforced. International reports about poor farmers selling their children into prostitution are true - many children are held in brothels against their will. However, the majority of sex workers are adults who enter the industry of their own free will out of basic economic necessity and often support many people on their earnings. Remember that child prostitution, slavery, and violence against sex workers still happens; if you encounter any of these activities, please report them to the Tourist Police (Frommers Online, undated).

Frommer's takes a somewhat confusing stance here, as on one hand they warn about the young women and girls who are increasingly being sold into prostitution against their will, and then on the next page provide details about where to go to see these girls and what to expect while you are there. Guidebooks see their tourist market as people who want to access the seedier side of Bangkok's nightlife, but apparently these tourists are the same upstanding citizens who would report any violence or underage sex workers they might come across.

This is the stance that many of the travel guides written in the past decade make; they have detailed information about the HIV/AIDS crisis, highlight the problem of child prostitution, and say that they will not list details about specific venues that sell sex. However many of the mainstream guidebooks and even the so-called 'counter-cultural' guidebooks all make it clear

that the sex industry is there, and make it plain that most everyone *does* interact with the sex industry; they essentially normalize prostitution and implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) suggest that these venues/spaces might be seedy but they are worth going to see.

For example, the 2004 Rough Guide, known as a more ‘counter-cultural’ guide amongst the mainstream guidebooks, tells its tourists in Thailand about an interesting ‘family’ suggestion for a night out in Phuket saying: ‘If you’re looking for something to do with yourself or your kids in the evening, check out the nearby transvestite Simon Cabaret’ (Gray and Ridout, 2004:685). The transsexual cabaret here seems preferable to taking children to BanglaRoad which is described as ‘a noisy strip of go-go clubs and neon-lit open-air “bar-beers” staffed by flirty solicitous hosts’ (Gray and Ridout, 2004:685).

The 2007 Lonely Planet guide generally sees the sex industry as a type of carnival, one that is not threatening yet might initially shock people; it is all part of having a ‘crazy’ or ‘bizarre’ experience. For example, the 2007 *Lonely Planet Guide to Bangkok* tells its readers to get over their ‘initial revulsion’ and try a tasty fried cricket:

Calling All Daredevils: Silly you- the average garden pest is really a tasty treat. After the wet season, vendors appear throughout town (try Th Khao San) with conical heaps of stir-fried bugs (crickets, red ants and water beetles). Pull off the legs and pop the bugger in your mouth, *after which initial revulsion will turn into potato chip-like addiction*(Williams, 2007: 62 emphasis added).

This is remarkably similar to the language that they use in the larger *Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand* edition of the same year, where they suggest that Patpong is a reasonable tourist destination for the average backpacker:

In fact, the courtship habits of the hairless mammal are so pronounced in Bangkok that *any moral revulsion toward the flesh trade eventually mellows into ambivalent absurdity*' (Williams et al, 2007:171 emphasis added).

So it seems that as travelers in Thailand, we are to put aside any distaste we might have about eating bugs or watching women sell their bodies, as it is simply part of the experience. Travelers seem encouraged to visit the unusual or experience the strange. While the 1997 Lonely Planet has lady boy cabaret bars listed under the 'Go-Go Bar' section, the 2007 edition has a special 'Bizarre Bangkok' inset where tourists are encouraged to experience 'Bangkok's freakier side' (Williams, 2007:146). Lady boy shows are listed alongside a forensic museum that houses the cadaver of a Thai serial killer and appendages or bits of flesh from other notorious murderers.

Tourists are invited into the sex industry to visually consume not just the bodies of sex workers, but the whole process of sex tourism. The 2007 Lonely Planet entry for Soi Cowboy invites travelers to take a 'fly-on-the-wall' look at an internet café where Thai sex workers are 'writing love-letter emails to their new sugar daddies; the well-worn piece of paper in front of them is something of a "master" copy' (Williams et al, 2007:171). The otherwise boring aspects of the lives of female sex workers are fair game for tourist eyes, even when they are not working on a red-lit stage.

As well the 2007 Lonely Planet Bangkok guide refers to Patpong as a 'circus' a number of times:

After a day of hiding from the elements, enjoy the cooler temperatures of nightfall at the circus of Patpong and the nearby bars and clubs (Williams, 2007: 38).

Unless you've come with a briefcase in tow, you'll meet Silom [a geographic area in Bangkok where Patong is located] at night thanks to the infamous red light district of Patong, now a tamer skin circus and souvenir market (Williams, 2007: 96).

As does the 2007 Lonely Planet Thailand guide:

Silom's most famous attraction in Patong, a raunchy circus of go-go bars and an oddly complementary market of pirated goods (Williams et al, 2007:136).

Bangkok's most famous red-light district dates back to the beginning of the West's fascination with Asian prostitutes. Patong has become more of an all-purpose circus than a flesh market...go-go bars still put on erotica shows that are visited by gawkers for a good laugh rather than a hard-on (Williams et al, 2007:171).

The Lonely Planet guidebook treats the sex industry as a kind of freak-show, where tourists are invited to pop along to look at the circus performers. These tourist guides advocate a visual interaction with these places, but the experience of the tourists is expected to be visceral- revulsion, sexual arousal, even laughter are part of the tourist experience here.

Lonely Planet's section on Pattaya is equally contradictory as they both condemn the sex trade but also tell tourists where to go to experience the sex industry:

Pattaya's notoriety for sex tourism revolves around the agglomeration of discos, outdoor 'beer bars' and go-go clubs making up Pattaya's red-light district at the southern end of the beach...less overt is the shadowy and sickening child sex trade, and sadly it is not uncommon to see Western men walking with young Thai boys and girls. Traditionally the sex scene was focused around 'Walking Street' at the southern

end of the beach, but every year a batch of new bar bars open, especially along Sois 7,8, and 9 to the north' (Williams et al, 2007:240).

The ambiguity is evident here, as the Lonely Planet 'advises' travelers of social and environmental problems in Thailand, but also directs the tourists towards sexualized areas. These two sentiments seem incongruous, especially considering the information the Lonely Planet provides about red light areas and sexualized venues. While Patpong and Walking Street are not the main centers where child sex workers may be procured, the fact that tourists might see pedophiles with child sex workers still advocates a kind of voyeuristic stance that signposts this 'problem' as something tourists should watch out for; to condemn child prostitution on one hand and then to direct tourists to go and watch the fallout from child sex tourism on the streets of Patpong and Walking Street seems problematic.

In an email with a commissioning editor for Lonely Planet, I ask Tashi Wheeler if she thinks they have any responsibility to advise travelers about sex tourism. She replies:

Lonely Planet's stance on sex tourism in Thailand is of course that it is a bad thing. We feel that we have a responsibility not to ignore it but to try to tell travelers the realities on the ground. We don't try to highlight the sex industry but we do tell it like it is... We don't encourage authors to write about sex tourism but I do feel we have a responsibility to travelers to advise them on what they should be aware of when they are in the country. This covers environmental concerns, sex tourism, poverty, unchecked building development in tourist areas and so on. We want our information to help travelers to have a positive impact on a place (personal email communication, 2008).

These details about the sex industry almost make the issue more problematic as they mix information about the sex industry seamlessly with other more innocuous details. Talking

about ‘delicate sea breezes’ and ‘infamous go-go bars’ in the same paragraph as cautions about sex tourism gives a confused message to tourists; while there is an implicit condemnation of the sex tourists that are talked about, this approach also works to highlight the issue and sex tourism becomes positioned as another tourist sight to be consumed. Thailand is as well known for prostitution as it is for its (male) sex tourists, and the streets, bars, and clubs that are associated with both of these consumable sights become the spaces where the drama unfolds and where tourists can go to ‘people watch’.

Part of the problem in interpreting guidebooks is determining whom these publishing companies are targeting. If tourists to Thailand were all single men looking for sexual adventures with local Thai women, then perhaps the way in which these guidebooks are situated would have to be analyzed with this particular perspective in mind. However, tourism is continuing to grow in Thailand, and the sex industry in Thailand shows no signs of slowing or receding; tourism and sex tourism in Thailand are growing together: ‘Tourism receipts have risen from 17.8 billion baht (US\$868 million) in 1980 to 285 billion baht (US\$7,119) in 2000’ (Song et al, 2003:364). Recent figures suggest that tourism accounts for nearly 5% of Thailand’s GDP, with critics arguing that sex tourism on its own makes up anywhere from 1% (Renton, 2005) to 3% (Lovering, 2003) of Thailand’s GDP<sup>24</sup>. However statistics from the TAT show that tourist numbers, for both male and female tourists, have risen considerably over the past decade and the ratio between male and female tourists has changed considerably from the 1970s and 1980s. Table 3.1 shows tourist figures from the late 1970s to the late

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<sup>24</sup> Given the nebulous nature of the sex industry, these estimates are far from conclusive; it is very difficult to say with any accuracy how big the sex industry in Thailand actually is (which is true of most black market industries). Take, for example, the estimated numbers of women working in the sex industry in Thailand that range anywhere from 65,000 to 2.8 million (Richter, 1989; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Royal Thai Police, 2000; Booranapim and Mainwaring, 2002). Indeed, because prostitution occurs outside of ‘official’ sexualized venues, because sex workers dip in and out of the trade, because sex tourists don’t consider see their relationships as commercial in any way, the discursive nature of the Thai sex industry means that calculating how big the sector is, from with the supply or the demand side, is nearly impossible. An ILO report on the sex industry in Thailand not just on sex workers in bars and brothels, but also on women working in massage parlors, as golf caddies, hair dressers, and hotel receptionists. What ‘counts’ as part of the sex industry is unclear and estimates of prostitution may not take into the account the occasional or ‘unofficial’ sex workers, and as such may not necessarily accurately reflect the scale of the wider sex industry, especially in Thailand where the market is difficult to accurately define.

1980s, and there is a clear discrepancy between the number of male and female visitors, with men making up nearly three-quarters of the tourist market in Thailand.

**Table 3.1**

Year	Male	Female
1977	66.02%	33.98%
1978	66.76%	33.24%
1979	69.21%	30.39%
1980	71.13%	28.87%
1981	70.34%	29.66%
1982	70.51%	29.49%
1983	70.21%	29.79%
1984	71.32%	28.68%
1985	71.66%	28.34%
1986	73.19%	26.81%

Table taken from Truong, 1990: 177

However, female visitors to Thailand have gradually increased over the last ten years (seen below in table 3.2) and from 1998-2007 the numbers of female tourists have risen from 3 million to 5 million. While male visitors still make up the majority of international travelers in the country, the margin is waning as more and more female tourists are visiting Thailand.

**Table 3.2**

Year	Total Number of Male Travelers	% Change from previous year of male travelers	Total Number of female Travelers	% Change from previous year of female travelers
1998	4.7m	+6.05	3.0m	+9.94
2000	5.6m	+9.93	3.8m	+12.17
2001	6.0m	+5.91	4.0m	+5.69
2002	6.4m	+6.73	4.3m	+8.21
2003	6.1m	-4.01	3.8m	-12.28
2004	6.7m	+8.65	4.9m	+29.02
2005	6.7m	+0.92	4.7m	-3.96
2006	8.2m	+21.43	5.6m	+17.99
2007	9.4m	+14.88	5.0m	-10.34

Source: TAT statistics

NB data for 1999 was unavailable

However, even in guidebooks from the 1970s and 1980s, we can see that the sex industry, while primarily open to men, was also available to female tourists.

In their 1979 Thailand edition, Berlitz acknowledges that the sexualized tourist spaces in Bangkok are primarily designated for men, but they make it very plain that women are

allowed into these arenas as well, either as voyeurs in the go-go bar, or perhaps as clients at massage parlors:

Though these bars are clearly designed to serve male customers, women are welcome to come in for a drink and look. Some “gay” bars now operate in the same areas, especially around Patpong...Though they are invariably listed under “nightlife” these establishments provide all-around services for sybarites from lunchtime to midnight closing. Setting the tone, parlours display the staff masseuses-sometimes clad in evening gowns!- behind one-way glass near the entrance. The more elegant parlours advertise that women customers are also served (Berlitz, 1979:94).

Likewise, in 1988 the Thomas Cook guide suggests that Bangkok’s attractions cater for a male population, but that women can and do access sexual entertainment as part of their visit to Thailand:

Massage parlours (open 6 pm-midnight weekdays and 2pm-midnight weekends and public holidays) are now found throughout the city with concentrations in Patpong and on New Patchaburi Road. While such nightlife attractions are primarily oriented towards the single male, it is not uncommon for female visitors to go to a bar or massage parlour; there are certainly no restrictions (Hoskin, 1988: 92).

At Thomas Cook puts it, there are ‘no restrictions’ for any tourists to Thailand, male or female, who are free to access one of the numerous massage parlors, go-go bars, or nightclubs that Bangkok has to offer.

As seen in Table 3.1, during the 1970s and 1980s, male travelers made up a greater percentage of foreign tourists in Thailand, so the explicit mention of women and the position that the guidebooks take on women’s participation is interesting. This is partly because it

presents that the sex industry is quite normal; it is not portrayed as problematic, seedy, or dangerous. There is also an assumption that female tourists might want to engage in the sex industry, either as voyeurs or active participants. The guidebooks seem to imagine a tourist market of men and women that want to engage with the sex industry and do not (and the books confirm, should not) have any moral reservations about engaging with sexualized spaces.

As women tourists become more and more prevalent in Thailand, it becomes important to think about the message that guidebooks send out to both male and female tourists, and to consider the ways in which this normalized discourse might impact on women tourists' decisions to engage with what seems like a accessible and normal tourist space.

#### *Expert Knowledge of the Sex Industry: Local Tourist Guides*

Guidebooks are not the only source of information tourists have about where to go and what to visit in a given destination. Tourists in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, or Pattaya will have access to a variety of local publications that provide information about local events, local hotspots, and information about local attractions. Three magazines published in May 2008, entitled 'The New Visitor Magazine: LOOK Tourist Information Magazine' (abbreviated here as LOOK) and 'Tour and Guide to Thailand: Shopping Travel Dining Hotel Entertainment' (abbreviated here as TG), and 'Touristways: Tourist Information Magazine' (abbreviated here as TW) were widely available for free in hotels near Khao San Road and Sukhumvit Road, two major tourist areas that cater to a wide range of travelers: younger travelers, low-income backpackers, middle-income travelers, and older tourists.

These guides aim to provide tourists with more up-to-date knowledge about what's going on in a particular area. LOOK suggests that the objective of their guide is to provide tourists with 'accurate, useful and up-to-date information' and include 'maps, important numbers,

hotels, travel agencies, a current list of festivals and events, night entertainment venues, shopping and special services' (2008: 12). TW calls itself a 'tourist information magazine' and the front cover suggest that they will tell tourists 'what to buy- where to buy- where to go- where to stay' (2008, front cover). These magazines claim an expert knowledge of Bangkok, giving tourists more current advice about where to go and what to do in Thailand. In addition to local maps and details about festivals and events, these magazines have a large number of advertisements that bookend the brochures and provide insightful details about the images of Thailand selected to present to tourists.

Tourist advertising works to position destinations as attractive to potential tourists; a number of studies have looked at destination images published in tourist brochures (Dilley, 1986; Schellhorn and Perkins, 2004) to explore the way local peoples and cultures are 'sold' to potential consumers. Oppermann et al (1998) suggest that sexual imagery is often used in marketing to sell products and to advertise holiday destinations. Most of the tourism research that explores representations of destinations through images has focused on marketing and tourism brochures - publications that are meant to 'sell' tourist destinations to tourists. It is worth briefly considering the glossy advertisements and the text used in these tourist brochures, as exploring the way that images are used in tourism brochures can give some indication of what goods and services are deemed to be of interest to tourists in these areas. While these local guides would only be available to tourists already in Thailand, they do provide some useful insights into the way that particular tourist services are sold to tourists.

Local magazines on offer to tourists in Bangkok clearly illustrate the pervasiveness of the sex industry, and offer a normalization of sexualized Thai bodies. The front cover of LOOK features a young Thai monk kneeling in front of a Buddhist statue. Upon opening the magazine, the first two pages are advertising tailors in the Sukhumvit area, as are the following two pages. However, on page five there are a number of smaller adverts for massage and escort agencies: 'Pretty Models' main title reads: 'We have beautiful Massage

Girls: Top Model Escorts' and features a Thai woman dressed in leather lingerie with a whip-her eyes blocked out with a black bar. 'Sabai Massage' and 'Elegance Salon' both feature massage and beauty treatments- as well as a photograph of their young, all female staff suggesting perhaps more intimate services might be available. 'Sabai Massage' suggests they offer Thai, oil, and foot massages with 'service in the privacy of your hotel room' and 'massage service by beautiful Thai ladies'. The 'Boo-Sa-Bar' is a friendly British-Thai bar that has massage services as well as good times and football. The photo for the bar features a couple (presumably the owners): an older, bald white man with a young, slim Thai woman. The last eight pages of the magazine consist of colored advertisements for massage and 'special' services that feature male, female, and trans-gendered 'escorts'. The inclusion of male and trans-gendered sex workers suggests that it is not simply Thai women who are part of the sex industry, two of the ads that feature male sex workers note that their massages are 'for men by men' but the other three ads simply suggest handsome, fun escorts or friendly, attractive masseurs are available- for male or female customers.

The TG magazine is a near carbon copy of LOOK - the agencies, bars, and massage parlors being advertised are different, but again, the publication is book-ended by pages of advertisements. The cover image of TG magazine features a Buddhist statue in front of famous religious ruins in the ancient capital of Ayuthaya. Like LOOK, the first two pages are advertisements for tailors in Sukhumvit and other areas in Bangkok, but on page three massage services feature their all-female staff and page four offers 'Star Girls' and 'Modeling'. These escort agencies feature Asian models wearing lingerie in a reclined position and both offer an 'enjoyable evening in the privacy of your room'. At the end of the publication on page 34 is an agency that presents an Asian model in a bikini and suggests that their 'young, talented' therapists can 'revitalize you today'. Above this advertisement is a photo of religious temples in Ayuthaya- standing in for advertising space that did not sell. On page 35, 'All True Fantasia' offers 'beautiful models with uniforms- teen's girls[sic], nurse, office girls, mistresses, [sic]Queen's[sic], Teen's[sic] Dominas[sic], Fetish and SUBMISSIVE WITH

UNIFORMS' and below this advertisement is another stand-in photo, this time depicting a palm tree in a nearly deserted beach. These two typical images of Thailand- religious temples at Ayuthaya and the white sand beaches- are juxtaposed with that other traditional Thai sight- the half naked Thai woman, the 'SUBMISSIVE' who is waiting to 'serve your ever [sic] desire'.

TW is also a free magazine, smaller than the other two publications but also widely available at tourist hotels. The cover image of the brochure features a scene from an 'Elephant Theme Show', with decorated elephants, Thai men dressed as traditional warriors, and a fire blazing in the background. The first nine pages are colored advertisements for innocuous businesses (tailors, hotels, dental practices) while the final ten pages feature eight pages worth of sexual advertisements. The advertisement for 'Beauty Queen Beauty Queen' on page 39 features an Asian model in a bikini with cleavage prominently displayed. The services are available 'Only for executive and V.I.P. person [sic]' and they offer a money back guarantee if you are not happy with your service. Male, lady boy, and lesbian dominatrixes [sic] are available and are 'Safe, clean & healthful[sic], staff with medicated [sic] and cheapest rate'.

All of the brochures provide a variety of information, maps, textual details of tourist sites and personal ads; in short these magazines seem to offer a comprehensive guide to Thailand and showcase religious iconography on two of the covers. Thai women (and to a lesser extent Thai men) are positioned in both these free guides as a product of Thailand- alongside the cultural artifacts and ancient ruins- just next to the beautiful beaches and crystal clear water- the Thai sex industry and the Thai sex workers are offered as a tourist commodity to be seen and explored by tourist consumers.

## **Conclusion**

The sex industry in Thailand has been closely aligned to the larger tourist industry for decades. While there are a number of factors in Thai society that make prostitution and sex work acceptable (in some ways) external factors have had a major impact on the development of the sex industry and its promotion as a tourist attraction. This chapter has so far attempted to list how these factors have worked to establish Thailand as a sexualized space within western countries, and how representations of the sex industry are normalized so that tourist consumption of sex shows or go-go bars is seen as part of one's ordinary travel experience. The impact of HIV/AIDS on the sex industry had some impact on destabilizing the attitude that prostitution was 'ok' and helped to bring out some issues regarding the exploitation of children sex workers. However, the sex industry is still regarded as a 'normal' tourist attraction and tourists of all genders are encouraged to see *Katheyo* Cabaret shows and 'take a peek' at the go-go bars in Patpong. This normalization suggests that engaging with the sex industry can be a way to authentically engage with Thailand and Thai culture.

Through this normalized representation, the exoticized/racialized Other has become a tourism commodity based on the visual representations in tourism publications: '...images promote values that are entrenched not only in dominant ideologies but also in capitalistic interests (that is, the commodification of the Other). As such representational processes can never be neutral because they are produced and sustained by a particular framework that contributes to the knowledge and understanding of the Other' (Buzinde et al, 2006: 712). Furthermore, the images collected in tourism guides 'circumscribe the boundaries of experience and essentially direct the tourist gaze (Buzinde et al, 2006: 712).

Schellhorn and Perkins (2004) use Urry's (2002) conceptualization of the tourist gaze to suggest that travelers act out this aesthetic reflexivity visually: 'The role which tourist advertising images play in the context of gaze anticipation, place representation and actual

tourism experience and performance... relates to processes of place promotion' (Schellhorn and Perkins, 2004:99). Further, they argue that these products of advertising images 'manipulate people's perceptions by controlling the mental images tourist places evoke... Once stereotyped and labeled... places become identified in terms of strong core images. Widely shared sets of such place images collectively comprise a "place-myth"' (Schellhorn and Perkins, 2004:99-100). They suggest that there is a strong link between the way a particular space/place is perceived and the consumption practices of tourists: tourists will literally try to buy into this place-myth by consuming things/items/events that are authentically representative of that locale. 'Markers which function as visual, locational, or contextual designations authenticate advertised information about a destination' (2004:102). As we will see in Chapter Four, women were aware that Thailand was likely to be a sexualized destination before they arrived, and many participants pointed to the normal, tourist nature of the sex industry, suggesting that going to see a sexual show was part of the normal tourist routine.

As more and more women are visiting Thailand and experiencing the sexual nature of tourist spaces/places it becomes necessary to revisit our understanding of who these places and sites are aimed at. The introduction highlighted some of the ways that women tourists are understood as being outside of this equation. Current understandings of sex tourism that focus on prostitute-use as a means of defining what 'counts' as sexual tourism means that these visual (yet visceral) interactions with the sex industry are not on the radar. While there are some suggestions that western women are disinterested in or put off by the sex industry (Bowes, 2004; Renton, 2005), data from guidebooks suggests that perhaps this is not always the case. Part of this confusion may lie on understandings of what actually counts as the sex industry. Indeed, coming up with a concrete definition of sex tourism is far from straightforward, and pinpointing exactly what is meant by the term 'Thai sex industry' or 'sex tourism' in this context is difficult as the sex industry is not just prostitution; the sex industry is the sex tourists, the sex workers, and the show performers, but it is also the red lights, the

'carnival', the physical spaces (bars, shows, streets, alleys). The Thai sex industry is understood as a place, a space, a service, and an event. All of these things must be taken into account. Thinking about the sex industry in this sense means reevaluating how tourists interact with the sex industry; it is no longer simply about prostitution. Levels of engagement can be multilayered and have multiple meanings; going to see the sex industry becomes a tourist experience in and of itself.

The next chapter will suggest that western women tourists internalize this understanding of the sex industry as an authentic experience. The sex industry is seen as part of a normal tourist experience, and something that one should do as part of their tourist activities. The desire to have an authentic engagement also relates to women's tourist identities, and the processes of tourism come together to encourage interactions with spaces that are marked out as particularly relevant for particular places. Shields argues that '...one can trace the rise and fall of a specific conception or image of a place partly through the record of the number of people, who have visited and a knowledge of what activities people engage in when they are there (Shields, 1991: 47). The next chapter will place women *in* sexual venues and spaces, showing that, for a number of women, the sex industry is a place they want to visit and an experience they want to be able to demonstrate knowledge about. Women's understandings of Thailand are important in the types of activities that they consume, and the types of experience they wish to have. Chapter Four will follow on the data presented here, to suggest that this positioning of the sex industry as a core feature of Thai culture has an important impact on female tourists' desires to interact with sexual spaces and places.

## **Chapter Four: Locating Women Tourists in ‘Authentic’ Sexual Spaces/Places**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Three has argued that the sex industry in Thailand has been shaped by a number of historical, social, and economic factors, and that these factors have helped to increase the size and scale of the tourist-oriented sex industry with the result that sexual areas and venues have been popularized and seen as part of the Thai tourist landscape. Popular western and touristic discourses represent Thailand as an exotic/erotic zone, and Thai people are cast as sexualized Others.

This chapter will look at the ways in which tourists react to these images of Thailand as a sexualized space, and explore the extent to which western women might see the sex industry as an authentic part of Thailand. Two key questions will shape this chapter. Firstly, do western women tourists interact with and consume the sex industry? Secondly, how do they understand and makes sense of these interactions?

To answer these questions, this chapter begins by locating women tourists in sexual spaces. Survey, interview, and observational data collected in Thailand are presented here to show that some women do indeed access sexually oriented tourist experiences during their travels. The particular sights/sites that these western women consume will be examined, and the female participants’ understandings of these spaces and the ways in which they feel they are able to interact with sexualized settings will be explored. Having shown that some female tourists are accessing sexualized spaces in Thailand, this chapter will then work to unpick the ways in which women feel they are entitled to access these sexual spectacles.

### **Visiting Sexual Spaces: Situating female tourists**

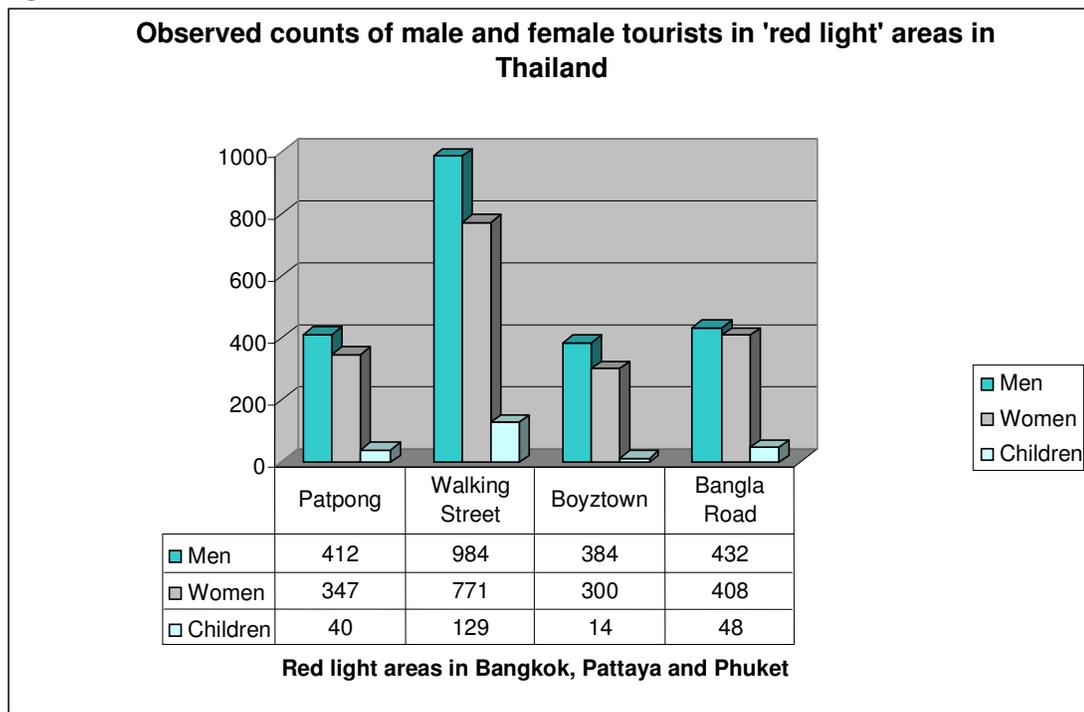
Patpong is one of the most well-known red light areas in Thailand, known for both the night market (selling counterfeited goods and tourist souvenirs) as well as its other form of erotic nightly entertainment. One of the first data gathering activities undertaken when I arrived in Thailand was to explore the Patpong area to find out what types of venues were located there, what kinds of shows were on offer, what kind of atmosphere this infamous market area had, and what kinds of tourists were visiting this space. In Patpong the clubs, go-go bars, and ping pong shows line the narrow streets, with the market stalls located in the middle of the area, between the bars and shows on either side of the pedestrianized road. I was somewhat nervous about exploring this area, as I had heard about the overwhelming nature of the raunchy sex scene packed into the small streets. I was worried that as a white, female woman I would look conspicuous- that the touts would immediately recognize me as an outsider -and that I would be the focus of unwanted attention from these shadowy figures who are in control of the sex industry. I need not have worried, as my initial explorations revealed that I was far from being the only western woman in the area; while the loud music and flashing lights of the go-go bars and ping pong shows were indeed overwhelming, the fact that there were so many other female tourists wandering the area meant that I blended in and was able to wander Patpong without anyone taking a second glance.

This was also true for Walking Street in Pattaya, Bangla Road in Phuket, and Ta Pae Gate in Chiang Mai; all of these areas are designed specifically for sightseers, the roads/streets are set up for people to walk through, and the bars/clubs with the flashing red lights and loud music are meant to attract attention from passersby. In Phuket and Pattaya, there are large numbers of go-go dancers and lady boys from the shows who stand out on the street to entice customers in, and many tourists pose for pictures with the sex workers during their visit to the area. Women tourists were common in all of these areas, single travelers, women in groups, women with male partners, women with female partners- all of these women were present in

enough numbers that I never felt conspicuously out-of-place in these red light settings, nor did I ever feel unsafe as I was conducting research in these areas.

More formal observations were conducted in Patpong, Walking Street, Boyztown, Bangla Road, and Ta Pae Gate, with counts taken of the male and female tourists who visited these red light spaces. Observations in the red light areas entailed a 10-20 minute period of observation at a main entry or exit point in the district/street. Counts were conducted at different times of the evening over a number of days (4 evenings in each area). Figure 4.1 shows the counts of the male and female tourists present in these areas at a given time. The data suggests that in all of these outdoor red light districts there were roughly equal numbers of women and men visiting the areas, and while there are some methodological challenges to validating this type of data (as discussed in Chapter Two) the figures show at least that white western women do visit these areas and are part of the tourist population engaging with these sexualized spaces.

**Figure 4.1**

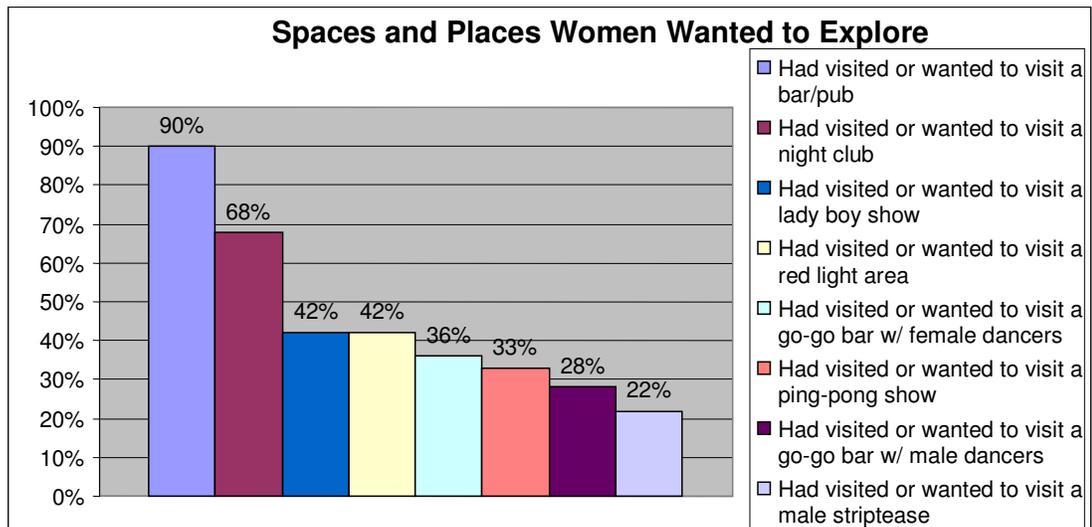


Many of these areas offer other forms of touristic engagement- for example the market in Patpong might attract 'normal' tourists, as might the nightclubs in Bangla Road or Walking Street. This is an important point, as there are no clearly demarcated spaces where 'sex tourism' takes place or where the 'sex industry' exists. Rather the sex industry spans a wide variety of venues and is not limited to any geographical zone. There are of course some places that have a much higher concentration of sexual venues in much smaller areas, but in general there is a great deal of overlap between 'normal' tourist spaces and 'sex' tourist spaces. However, the interview and survey data show that many of the women were aware of the sex industry, and some of these women wanted to explore/visit these spaces/places as part of their tourist experience.

131 women were surveyed in the four tourist areas, and 21 women participated in formal interviews. Many of the women taking part in both the survey and the interviews had been to a red light area or planned on visiting one of these sexualized spaces.

Of the 21 interviewees, 20 had been to red light areas during their trip, and the one woman who had not been was planning on going when she met her sister later during her visit. The survey also shows that women expressed a desire to visit a range of spaces/places; some of them seem obviously sexual, some perhaps less so. Figure 4.2 shows the various venues that women tourists wanted to visit during their trip to Thailand. Survey respondents were asked which, if any, of the following venues they would like to visit, or had visited already, during their trip to Thailand.

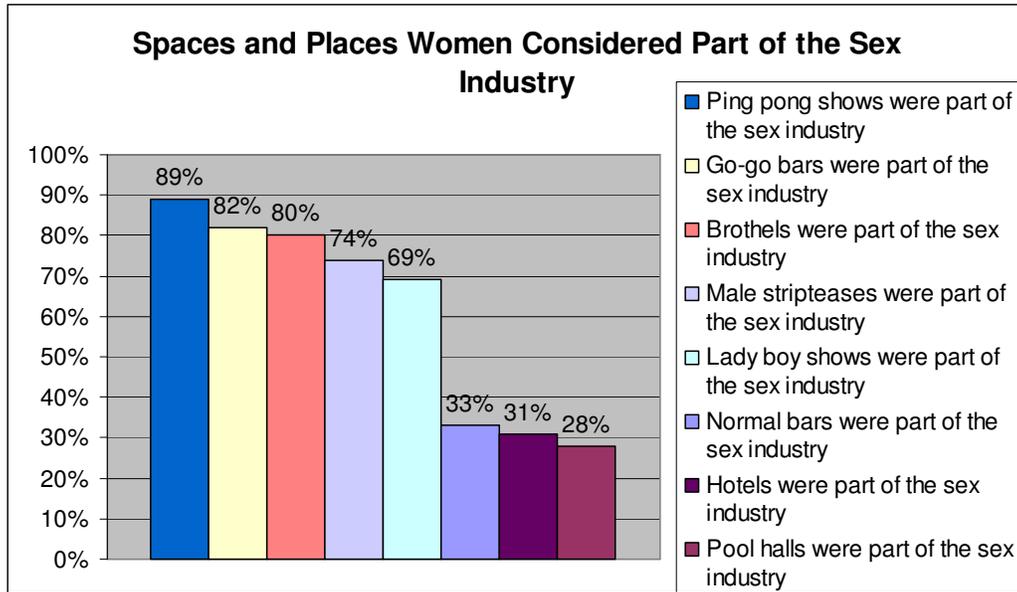
**Figure 4.2**



Perhaps it is unsurprising that 90% of women would want to visit a bar or pub, or even that 68% would want to visit a night club, but nearly half of all women surveyed expressed a desire to visit a red light area, or a lady boy show. Over a third wanted to visit a go-go bar with female dancers, or see a ping pong show. Fewer women wanted to visit spaces that male sex workers would inhabit, a point that will be examined in more detail in Chapter Five.

The women in the survey were also aware that a wide variety of venues were likely to be included as part of the sex industry. Figure 4.3 highlights women's understandings of the diffuse nature of the sex industry, as they suggest a wide variety of venues, some that are more obviously sexual, and some that are much less obvious, are part of the Thai sex industry. As well, women clearly identified some areas as part of the sex industry, and as seen in figure 4.2, were still keen to go and explore these sexualized zones.

Figure 4.3

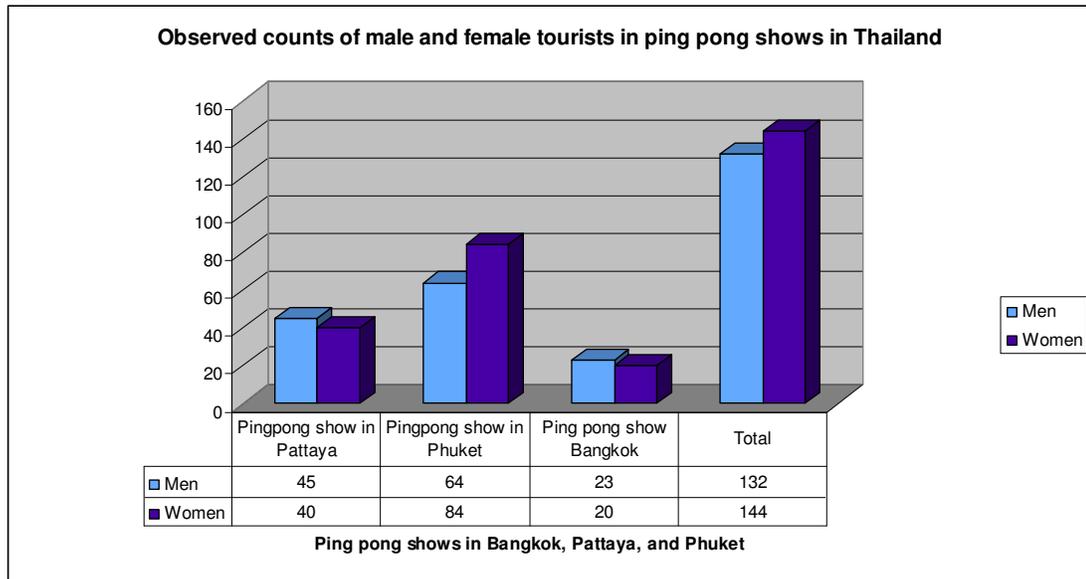


The survey results suggest that many of the participants knew that the sex industry in Thailand was extensive, and were aware that many different spaces/places might be part of the sex industry, even those that might not normally be considered a deviant or sexual space. This tourist gaze is squarely focused on the sex industry as a place of interest, and while only some women decided to engage with the sex industry during their visits, many recognized the size and scale of the sex industry in Thailand. The fact that women pointed to the varied venues that might be part of sex industry highlights their knowledge about the extensive nature of sex industry in Thailand. It also suggests that many women decided to visit various venues knowing that they would likely be part of the sex industry. Women identified many different spaces as part of the sex industry, and yet still wanted to visit/explore these spaces.

Women's engagements with sexual shows offer a useful way of looking at some of the more direct, visual experiences with the sex industry. Observations in sexual shows were conducted at different times of the evening over a number of days, and lasted from half an hour to three hours depending on the length of the show and the type of activities taking place. Figure 4.4 shows the observed counts of tourists at ping pong shows at a given time. We can see that while there are tourist men visiting these spaces, women are also visiting these shows; ping

pong shows and other sexualized venues in Thailand are not the reserve of male sex tourists, and in fact, at some of the shows women outnumbered men.

**Figure 4.4**



In general, women survey participants were aware of the sex industry and many women knew that prostitution and sexual entertainment were widely available in Thailand. When asked about prostitution in Thailand, 93% of women agreed that they expected there to be a lot of prostitution in Thailand, with 46% agreeing that there was more prostitution than they imagined:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I expected there to be a lot of prostitution in Thailand (n=129)	(n=48) 37%	(n= 72) 56%	(n=4) 3%	(n=2) 2%	(n=3) 2%
There is more prostitution in Thailand than I imagined (n=129)	(n=25) 19%	(n=35) 27%	(n=17) 13%	(n=46) 36%	(n=6) 5%

Women knew about the sex industry in Thailand before they arrived; yet many women were still surprised at the expansive nature of the sex industry.

While most participants seem to have been aware of the sex industry before their visit to Thailand, only 8% of women said they were planning on visiting a sexual show before their trip. When if they had been to a ping pong or lady boy show, 27% of women surveyed saw a lady boy show, and 22% of women surveyed saw a ping pong show<sup>25</sup>. This perhaps suggests that something about being in the touristic space of Thailand enables, or encourages women's entrée into sexual spaces.

	Yes	No
Have you been to a ping pong show? (n=130)	(n=29) 22%	(n= 101) 78%
Have you been to a lady boy/cabaret show? (n=111)	(n=35) 31%	(n=76) 68%

Of the 21 women who were interviewed 11 of them had been to a ping pong show and 13 had been to a lady boy show.

### **The Sex Industry Continuum**

While some female tourists interacted with a wide variety of sexualized spaces during their visits, other women limited these interactions to the pedestrianized thoroughfares of the red light districts. Some women went to go-go bars in the evening, while other women went to lady boy shows and ping pong shows. Some women were outraged and scandalized by the *katheoy* sex workers simply standing in Bangla Road, while others did not bat an eyelid during their visit to a sex show. Each of these spaces offers a different kind of titillation, although perhaps these experiences exist on different scales: women wandering the market stalls at Patpong may not experience the same degree of sexual interaction as a woman at a ping pong show in Pattaya. It might be more appropriate to consider these various types of

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<sup>25</sup> There were slightly more women in the survey who 'had visited or wanted to visit' these types of shows. 33% had visited or wanted to visit a ping pong show, while 42% of women had visited or wanted to visit a lady boy show - as shown in Figure 4.2.

activities on a continuum, for example, with red light areas on one end, ping pong shows in the middle, and actually buying sex from sex workers at the other end. However, this does not mean that all of these interactions should not be investigated, and it does not mean that women's engagements with more 'innocent' forms of the sex industry should not be critically explored. The next section will begin to explore these interactions, as women's understandings of the Thai sex industry are elucidated.

### **Normalizing the Sex Industry**

This section will explore the interactions of western women in sexualized spaces. It will begin by suggesting women's knowledge of the sex industry stems not just from guidebooks, but importantly, from friends and family members who are acquainted with the sexual nature of Thailand. Women often heard about sex shows from friends or fellow travelers, which further helps to cement the impression that the sex industry is a normal space for tourists to engage with. This section will show the extent to which women engage with this understanding of the sex industry as a 'normal tourist experience', and suggest that they understand these sexual spaces to be part of real Thailand – going to see a ping pong show becomes part of an authentic or cultural experience here. Theorizations on authenticity help locate these practices, as the various ways that women construct these experiences is predicated upon their own understanding of what having an authentic experience in Thailand means.

### **I Heard it Through the Grapevine**

Women found out about sexualized spaces and ping pong shows in a variety of ways. Many of the women that I spoke to had heard about sexual shows from a guidebook. Some had seen cabaret shows advertised in hotel lobbies or at tourist information kiosks, while others had come across the sex industry as they were walking in red light areas, and had been enticed in by the sex workers on the street advertising the shows.

For some women like Diane and Elizabeth<sup>26</sup>, their knowledge of these shows came from word of mouth, rather than a travel guide. I ask them how they had come to know about the ping pong shows:

**Elizabeth:** I think everybody has to go and have a look at that street because they know, yeah, and maybe they heard or something, I don't know, yeah...

**Interviewer:** It's interesting that it's a tourist attraction- the first time I came I went and had a look as well- why do you think it is that people want to go and have a look?

**Diane:** Because it's part of Thailand, because your curious...but you're curious you want to see for yourself. Maybe you have a neighbor coming here who says you have to see for yourself...

For both these women, the sex industry is 'part of Thailand', a tourist attraction that everyone must do. Friends and neighbors may have talked about the wonders of the ping pong show, but for many women tourists having a first-hand look at the sexual spectacle and actually *seeing* these spaces/places/people is part of the tourist experience.

This was also true for Ella and Vickyin Bangkok, who explained why they wanted to see a transsexual cabaret:

**Interviewer:** So what made you decide to go see the Lady Boy show last night?

**Ella:** My mum has seen them in Scotland. 'The Lady Boys of Bangkok' it was called. They were on tour. They were gorgeous! My mum was impressed by it and said it was really good so I thought that I'd come and see them properly.

**Vicky:** I've always wanted to see it as well. They're hilarious.

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<sup>26</sup> All biography details of interview participants can be found in Chapter Two.

Her mother's experience of lady boy shows in Scotland<sup>27</sup> influenced Ella to see one of these shows in Thailand. A family member who had witnessed this 'hilarious' aspect of Thai culture in Scotland normalized the image of Thailand as a sexual space. This understanding of Thai culture and the sex industry - presented by her mother as a great evening out - influences Ella to see the same kind of show.

While many of the women had read about the sex industry in guidebooks on their way to Thailand (The Lonely Planet Guide was mentioned specifically by three interview participants and by many women I spoke to informally), many women found out about various shows from friends, family, and/or other travelers which also works to normalize tourism experiences of the sex industry; therefore seeing a sexual show was something many women were drawn to by the influence of other travelers. This word of mouth information about the sex industry serves to iterate the popular cultural and touristic literature representations of sexual spaces in Thailand.

Mandy and Laura had heard about Pattaya and ping pong shows from a 'group of lads' at home in Manchester. I ask the women about their visits to these shows:

**Interviewer:** Did you know about the show before you came over?

**Mandy:** Yes

**Laura:** Yeah

**Interviewer:** Was it something you thought you wanted to do or try?

**Mandy:** Well we had to! I wanted to try it because we got told about the balloon popping so we went to see that on the first night. The first night in Pattaya we went to see one.... a group of lads had been to Thailand, one of them, he's been twice and he's thinking of moving out over here. They love it that much that they're always

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<sup>27</sup> 'The Lady Boys of Bangkok' show has played for years at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and travels through the UK to sell out audiences during the rest of the year.

here. That is what really what made us decide to come. He said the nightlife was good and that there was plenty to do and there is.

Their knowledge of the ping pong shows had come from friends who had been to Thailand before, and this word of mouth was part of their decision to visit Pattaya and seek out sexualized entertainment.

This was also the case for Loreta who had been to Thailand on several occasions, and on her previous visit had gone to see a ping pong show in Patpong. She had heard about the ping pong shows from fellow travelers and decided to see for herself what all the ‘fuss’ was about:

**Interviewer:** So tell me about going to a ping pong show, tell me why you decided to go

**Loreta:** Um, I was traveling with two guy friends and obviously on the backpacker circuit it’s very well known as an excursion... I think we’d been there a few days and we’d been around the temples and we had a train to catch the next day or something and everyone in the bars, all the sort of young westerners, backpacker westerners had been talking about the show, ‘I did this, I saw that, it was amazing’.

**Interviewer:** So why were you keen to go?

**Loreta:** Um, to see what all the fuss was about.

**Interviewer:** Was it something you heard about before you got to Thailand?

**Loreta:** No it was something I heard about face to face, in bars, or from other travelers...

Loreta, having heard about the sex shows from other ‘knowledgeable’ travelers, tells me she went to the ping pong show with her two friends to investigate for herself the stories she had heard about.

Westerhausen (2002) highlights the importance word of mouth communications in Thailand, and suggests that most ‘cultural’ travelers see this oral communication as an ‘invaluable source of information’ that serves to ‘augment guidebooks upon arrival in the region’ (2002:77). The exchange of information between travelers is an important mechanism for highlighting what is a critical site/sight to be explored, and many travelers will depend on this word-of-mouth knowledge when deciding what to do and where to go in that particular region. The Thai sex industry was something that was often talked about by the women I spoke with, and friends, family, or other travelers - either in Thailand or back at home - often communicated this knowledge to them. The spread of this type of knowledge impacts upon tourists’ desires to see these shows, because they have become part of the tourist fabric- and are highlighted not only by guidebooks and popular culture, but also positioned as normal or ok to access because friends, relatives, or partners have talked about the amazing or horrible or hilarious experience they had accessing the sex industry.

### **A Normal Tourist Experience**

Many western women suggest that going to a red light area or visiting a ping pong show is part of a normal Thai tourist experience. In fact nearly half of all women surveyed, whether they had accessed any form of sexual entertainment, felt that seeing a ping pong show was the same as visiting a tourist attraction:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Going to see a ping pong show was just like visiting a tourist attraction. (n=129)</b>	(n=9) 7%	(n=46) 36%	(n=19) 15%	(n=36) 28%	(n=19) 15%

The fact that many participants agreed with this statement suggests that the sex industry was seen by many women part of the normal tourist frame, even if it was one that they chose not to participate in.

To see the sex industry as a tourist experience suggests an engagement with the dominant sexual discourses on Thai culture and the role of tourists within Thailand, to give women the impression that this is a tourist activity, or an experience that is touristically relevant for them. For some women, their understanding of what was appropriate tourist behavior and what counted as a relevant tourist experience was related to their understanding of Thailand and particular tourist cities/spaces in Thailand; the sex industry in Thailand was a tourist experience and a must-do tourist activity. In Phuket I asked Alison what made her venture down to Bangla Road- the highly sexualized street off Patong beach:

**Interviewer:** What made you go down to Patong?

**Alison:** Just to see, just to see... It's the pinnacle spot on the island so you can't come away from Phuket and not have been to Patong!

Patong, for Alison, was *the* place to experience the nightlife of Thailand. Although she knew there would be sex workers and sexual shows in this area, she felt it was a place that had to be seen. Alison, like many other women, went along to a transsexual cabaret show while she was staying in Phuket:

**Interviewer:** What made you decide to go to the cabaret?

**Alison:** Um, I think it's just one of those touristy things that you do-you go to the elephant show and you go to the cabaret...

The sex industry is understood as an important part of Thailand and Thai culture - something people read or hear about - seeing a sexual show is just another tourist attraction to be consumed during their visit to Thailand.

Laura and Mandy told me that they enjoyed the ping pong shows, and had been to several during the course of their visit to Thailand:

**Interviewer:** Do you think that the show is part of the tourist experience?

**Mandy:** Yes, definitely. You've got to go and see one, even if it's only one, just for the experience really.

**Laura:** Yes, it's enjoyable.

Women interviewees highlighted the ways in which they see the sex industry as part of a normal tourist experience. The sexualized arenas become something they associate closely with Thailand, and sexualized entertainment becomes part of many tourists' 'cultural' and touristic experience. Loreta, talking about her visit to a ping pong show, makes clear her position on the 'cultural' aspect of this experience:

**Loreta:** I'm not sure I'd go as far as to say I enjoyed the experience but I appreciated the experience, it was an interesting cultural phenomenon... I mean I also drank wine that had a dead snake in the bottle, which is not nice, I'm not proud really, it was quite horrible really- but it was one of things where yeah, I drank wine that had a dead snake in it, and I went to a ping pong show.

Ping pong shows are situated by her as a 'cultural phenomenon'. An experience that involved seeing Thai women pushing ping pong balls out of their vaginas is, for Loreta, a cultural experience. She admits here that it was not a 'nice' experience, it was actually 'horrible' in some way, but it was also something she felt, as a tourist in Thailand, that she must do.

For many women, visiting these types of shows was very particular to Thailand, and very particular to the Thai tourist experience. Of the 131 women surveyed, 29 female tourists had been to a ping pong show. 72% of these women agreed ‘I’d never go and see this kind of thing at home but here it’s just what tourists do’.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>I’d never go and see this kind of thing at home but here it’s just what tourists do. (n=29)</b>	(n=1) 3%	(n=20) 69%	(n=2) 7%	(n=4) 14%	(n=2) 7%

For many of the women interviewed, the sex industry is often seen as just another tourist attraction. Ping pong shows are just part of the normal tourist course, something they might not do at home but, because the sex industry is part of Thai culture, it becomes a normal type of tourist experience.

The sex industry was seen as a symbol of real Thailand for many of the women I spoke with. I asked Loreta about her experiences of the ping pong show:

**Interviewer:** So you got the impression [the ping pong show] was something that was open to all tourists?

**Loreta:** Yeah, and actually when I was there, there were lots of women at the show...

**Interviewer:** And did you tell your friends you went to a ping pong show when you got back?

**Loreta:** Yeah...

**Interviewer:** I mean was it part of your- I went to a temple, I went to see this, I went to a ping pong show- was it kind of on your list of things you did?

**Loreta:** Yeah...*it was a touristy thing to do in way...*

Loreta begins by qualifying her interactions with the suggestion that there were lots of other female tourists at the show and by agreeing that the shows are open to all tourists implies that this kind of interactions is actually very normal, a touristy thing to check off one's list.

For many of the women in the study, going to see a ping pong show is understood as a normal thing to do in Thailand, something that is an important part of how they construct their tourist experience. Different countries/cities will offer up different objects/peoples for tourist consumption, and indeed the objects of the gaze can be almost anything (Urry, 2002). Some women suggested that they wanted to see the shows because they were 'different' or unusual to what they would experience in their own country, but *also* because they were normalized within the discourses on Thailand and Thai tourism.

### **The Role of Authenticity**

To understand this interaction, it is helpful to look at the ways in which authenticity functions in tourism processes. Authenticity has been an important variable of study in the tourism literature, and theorists have often struggled with grasping this slippery term (Boorstin, 1964; MacCannell, 1973; 1976; Cohen, 1979). Contemporary understandings of authenticity in tourism have linked into theoretical debates on experiential tourism and have taken into account the constructed nature of tourists' interactions with host societies (Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Prentice, 1996; Cohen, 2002; Kim and Jamal, 2007; Wang, 2007; Wearing et al, 2010) and the role of the experience in tourists' desires to engage with particular spaces/places/people that they see as authentically oriented.

Wang has been an influential figure in discussions on authenticity, as he moves away from 'object-related authenticity' (Kim and Jamal, 2007: 183) to suggest a model of authentic engagement based on the importance of the experiential aspects of tourism processes. Wang suggests that when tourists go to foreign locales, visiting cultures and peoples 'different' to

their own authenticity becomes ‘a label attached to the visited cultures in terms of stereotyped images and expectations held by the members of tourist-sending society’ (Wang, 1999:355). This ‘symbolic’ authenticity has more to do with what the tourists themselves perceive and understand to be an authentic experience within the specific space/place they are visiting. Indeed, authenticity does not exist outside of itself; authenticity must be constructed, either by the tourist industry, local stakeholders, or tourists themselves, and can change over time and across cultures (Wang, 1999; Meethan, 2001). What is understood to be an authentic marker of a host society is always shifting and being co-produced, and varies of course, depending on the particular destination in question. Meethan suggests that authenticity is something that is constructed by tourists, yet authenticity ‘cannot be accounted for without considering the social and material contexts in which it is located’ (Meethan, 2001:95). The way that tourists understand authenticity *in Thailand* must be examined here, as the particular space/place/image of Thailand impacts upon the way tourists engage with certain touristic sites/sights, and depending on the way they understand real Thailand.

Most modern tourists do not seek out just *any* sites/sights, rather their gaze is directed and mediated, and often they seek out places that are considered authentic. These authentic sites are signposted by the travel industry; tour books highlight authentic cuisines, authentic streets, authentic churches, bazaars, markets, temples, villages, bars, peoples and so on (Buzinde, et al, 2004). There are no longer a few sights/sites marked out as authentic - but rather the list of authentic encounters one can have in a tourist destination is constantly growing, and changing. In this sense, consuming the authentic sex industry is not something that is done only by sex tourists - as the sex industry in Thailand becomes highlighted as a normal tourist experience, consuming this authentic sight/site becomes something that every and any tourist can do.

Some theorists have focused on the ways in which authenticity links into modern day consumption processes (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003; Cole, 2007); authenticity is not simply

limited to consuming the authentic objects of the tourist gaze. While certain places and sites are seen as authentic markers of a particular destination, authenticity exists in a more complicated and nuanced way as well (Li, 2000; Wang, 1999; 2007; Wearing et al, 2010). Examining these various critiques of authenticity as a construct in tourism studies Wang (1999) develops an alternative model of authenticity, termed 'existential authenticity': 'Existential authenticity is a potential existential state of Being which is to be activated by tourist activities. In this sense, the existential version can also be understood as...an "authentically good time"' (Wang, 1999: 352).

The existential tourist experience is divided into two frames, firstly 'Intra-Personal Authenticity: Bodily Feelings' which focuses on embodied experiences of tourism. Briefly put:

Tourism involves a bodily experience of personal authenticity. In tourism, sensual pleasures, feelings, and other bodily impulses are to a relatively large extent released and consumed and the bodily desires (for natural amenities, sexual freedom, and spontaneity) are gratified intensively. In short, all these aspects of tourism constitute an ontological manifesto for personal authenticity (Wang, 1999:363).

The other frame, 'Intra-Personal Authenticity: Self-Making' focuses on the way individuals find meaning or an 'authentic self' through travel. The importance of identity formation and tourism experience has been highlighted by a number of tourism theorists (Shields, 1991; Rojek, 1993; Johnston, 2001; Meethan, 2001; McCabe and Stokoe, 2004; McCabe and Marson, 2006; Sikes, 2006; Wearing et al, 2010). Many of these tourists seek some kind of authentic engagement with Other people and Other cultures. Butcher suggests that the tourist 'seeks selfhood through experiencing other cultures... [tourists are] often seen as intent on gaining an understanding of the host society's culture, and through this, discovering something about themselves' (Butcher in Wearing et al, 2010:31).

These theorizations on authenticity are important for this chapter, as the experience of tourism in Thailand is of critical importance for understanding women's engagement with sexual spaces, and in particular their desire to discover themselves by visiting the 'authentic' or 'cultural' tourist/sexual spaces of Thailand is key here.

Li suggests that specific spaces and places offer different ways of experiencing the authentic - the presentation of specific geographical areas will impact what experiences are deemed as worthwhile, and the configuration and social reality of these specific spaces/places influences what kinds of experiences tourists will seek out. In this sense, an authentic experience is not necessarily a search for a remote, 'unmodern', exoticized destination, but might instead be 'a desire for experiencing the vibrant life of the destination' (2000:877). The particular space of Thailand offers guests a particular type of escape that they feel is appropriate for that space/destination.

Loreta makes the distinction between the normal holiday activities on offer in Thailand, and holiday activities on offer elsewhere clear:

**Interviewer:** Did you come across Ping Pong Shows in other Southeast Asian countries?

**Loreta:** Well when I went to Laos it was a totally different environment, with hardly any sex industry- and the people who go there are different as well

**Interviewer:** What do you mean?

**Loreta:** It's a bit hard to describe, I suppose it's kind of like the kind of tourists who come to London and the kind of tourists who come to the countryside- you know...Thailand has a big reputation for being a place for meeting other people, getting drunk, having sex with strangers, westerners, other Thai people, eating lizards and scorpions and what have you- you know just a real assault in the senses- doing

something outrageous that's a lot of fun, that's quite full, drinking buckets at full moon parties

Loreta here relates her experiences in Thailand to 'strange' or 'debauched' activities. Her understanding of Thailand suggests that she sees this space as a place to engage in a particular set of behaviors – behaviors where she can act in a different and debauched way. If we contrast this with her interpretation of what to do in Laos, we can see a tangible difference:

**Loreta:** ...Laos is, it was really beautiful, it was beautiful countryside, it was very quiet, small small towns, really tiny with not much going on in them, and not much of a tourist industry at all- and the tourist industry that was there was very refined and we went to the Laos national ballet- and um had some traditional food and some kind of ceremony involving a magic piece of string and things like that- and went to a waterfall and a tiger sanctuary – those were our Laos activities compared to our Thai activities which were somewhat more lively and involved a lot more backpacker-ish drinking and carrying on. And obviously as well it depends on what part of Thailand you're in- if you go to the islands or something you're going for a good time like you're going to Ibiza or something - you know, in the minority of cases you're just going for the diving, but you're going to have fun, get drunk, meet other westerners of a similar age, and go dancing and drinking and that sort of thing. Um, yeah, compared to if you go to Chiang Mai- where there isn't as much of a sex industry, and it's nearer to Laos, and in Laos you didn't see too much at all.

As Li (2000) suggests, specific places offer up different ways of experiencing the authentic, and the social reality of Thailand impacts the kinds of behaviors tourists engage with. Laos is not a place to access the sex industry, but Thailand is. Laos is not a place to go wild, drinking and having sex, but Thailand is. Loreta's understanding of Thailand configures the country as a space for carousing and partying, for going to ping pong shows and exploring the sex

industry whereas her activities in Laos involved going to the National Ballet or visiting a waterfall. Her understanding of the role of the sex industry fits in with her more general understanding of what Thailand is about- having fun and ‘carrying on’ – and suggests that the desire for an authentic experience in Thailand is mediated through the understanding of the image associated with this sexualized destination.

### **Inversionary Behaviors**

The holiday space of Thailand seems to encourage some women to engage in a set of tourist practices that might go beyond their normal, everyday experiences. As we have seen for Loreta, the space of Thailand seemed to allow for ‘carrying on’, and engaging with the sex industry was part of this. For Mandy and Laura, the opportunity to relax and disengage from the ‘hustle and bustle’ is associated with visiting sexualized spaces:

**Interviewer:** Do you find it relaxing being here?

**Mandy:** Yes. It’s not so much of a hustle and bustle. You can do whatever you want - lie on the beach for a few hours, go back to the hotel, have a shower and walk back down here. We stay here for a few hours, have something to eat and that’s it. You don’t have to rush or be out by a certain time although we have to be out in the morning, we can go drinking....

**Interviewer:** Is drinking a big part of your holiday experience?

**Laura:** No... Not every night. It’s more go-go bars and ping pong shows, going to see a ping pong show....

Thailand here functions as a tourist space where one can unwind and escape from the normal pressures faced in their working lives at home. For Laura and Mandy, and for other participants as well, ‘escaping’ in Thailand also means engaging in activities that they would not do at home. Sexualized spaces and venues, seen as a normal part of Thai culture, are

embedded in women's understandings of Thailand, and are also seen as part of the entertainment that the holiday space has to offer. For Mandy and Laura, who were on holiday together as a couple, going to a ping pong show was an entertaining way to pass the evening.

For some women this idea of acting differently than they might at home moved beyond entering sexualized spaces, and meant actually engaging in some sexual practices of their own. For Callie, actually having sex with other tourists was part of her tourist experience in Thailand:

**Callie:** I've just gone on a sex ban because I've had way too much sex like uuhhh but because I am single and I'm traveling with a couple I'd be in a room of my own and I was thinking that I could really do what I want and I've fully embraced that and I think I'm chilling for a bit.

**Interviewer:** I guess there are lots of opportunities being in a backpacker place?

**Callie:** Yes. Having sex is easy. It's so easy. If you want to have sex it's just very easy. Don't judge me for that. It's such an easy environment to have it. You're away from home. You can go out until it's as late as you want especially if you're staying in a room on your own. If you're with other people it's a little bit different but if you're in a room on your own it's easy to say, 'Do you want to come back to mine?'

Being away from home, being in this 'backpacker' space, enabled Callie to engage in sexual activities in a way she might not have at home. For many of the tourists, having sex, drinking, lying on the beach, visiting a sexual show, were all highlighted as 'different' to their normal activities, and this suspension of normal behaviors is relevant for many tourists' experience of liminality (Bloor et al, 2000; Thomas, 2000)

Tourism has long been understood as a space/place out of time, and the importance of the liminal space of tourism is relevant here for many tourists in the Thai context. Turner's

(1969) examination of transitional stages draws on Van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage, and has been used in contemporary debates on tourism and tourist practices (Ryan and Hall, 2001; Mason and Lo, 2009; Wearing et al, 2010). Turner's work examined societal 'rites of passage'- where 'initiates' grouped together to form their own transitional communities. Turner referred to the experience of taking part in this group existence as 'communitas', and these ideas of ritual and rites of passage have been important in understanding the modern day tourist experience. For Turner, he maintains that the *liminal* phase was important, as the initiates were not subject to the normal social rules and regulations that governed society. Initiates were not expected to behave in a normal fashion, and in fact, could behave in what would be considered a deviant manner. The liminal phase was an important aspect of the ritual experience, and this phase allows people to act in opposition to the normal structures of society; for Turner this phase could be defined as 'anti-structure'.

However, there are few of what Turner (1969) would term 'rituals' left in modern society. Lett comments: 'Turner suggests that liminal phenomena have declined in importance in Western industrial societies as voluntary play (in many cases travel and travel related leisure activities) has gained ascendancy over obligatory ritual' (1983: 45). However, modern society still displays aspects of the liminal phase, albeit in different ways:

Turner has coined the term liminoid to designate those activities that have liminal attributes but lack ritual associations... Liminoid activities, in short, are those socially accepted and approved activities which seem to deny or ignore the legitimacy of the institutionalized statuses, roles, norms, values, and rules of everyday "ordinary" life (Lett, 1983: 45).

It is this liminoid space of tourism that allows for activities and exchanges that work to 'not only [to] stand apart from the rules and regulations of the normal world but they also

explicitly deny or invert those rules and regulations' (Lett, 1983: 47). This liminoid zone, this space out of time, allows for different' behaviors. For Lett's tourists these different activities included excessive drinking and sexual relations for yachters on vacation on the Caribbean, and the importance of the liminoid space of the holiday has been noted by a number of other theorists, and has particular implications for touristic (and sexual) behaviors (Black, 2000; Matilla et al, 2001; Thomas, 2005). Tourists who cross the limen (the threshold) into the liminoid state of the holiday are free to shed their behaviors and act outside of normal social constraints. Their ability to shed their attachment to the normal way of behaving allows them to participate in activities that they would not fit into the structure of their 'normal' routine.

The liminal edges of the tourist experience, and the particular setting of Thailand engage in behaviors that were out of the ordinary; the holiday space allowed some women to break free from constraints that might normally censure or restrain their behaviors<sup>28</sup>. Going to see the sex industry was constructed as taboo for some of the women, including Callie who says going to a ping pong show:

**Callie:** ...is one of those taboo things. You're not quite sure whether you should or not.

In Thailand, women are able to explore the taboos that they might not at home, by visiting sexual shows and spaces and visually consuming sexualized forms of entertainment. As Callie noted, 'You're not quite sure whether you should or not', but ultimately the space of Thailand and the holiday space mean that they can, and often do. Currie notes: 'Once in the liminoid state, individuals' behaviors are altered to an anti-structure or antithesis of their home environment. This liminoid state allows individuals the freedom to experience that which is not normally acceptable to their home environment, or to enact the inversionary behaviors of

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<sup>28</sup> Other theorists have also found that the holiday mode allows for tourists to engage in a variety of sexual behaviors that would be considered different to their normal practices. C.f. Black, 2000; Thomas, 2000; Matilla et al, 2001; Thomas, 2005.

the anti-structure' (Currie, 1997: 894). Many women see the sex industry as part of real Thailand, and as an authentic experience – it is the particular space of Thailand that allows women to engage in activities they would not normally be allowed/invited to see.

Female tourists in Thailand are engaging in particular activities as part of their tourist experience, and these embodied practices have an impact on the way they see themselves in this space. Liminality is connected both to the particular space/place dimension of the tourist experience as well as to the understanding of identity formations in this sphere, and as the next section will suggest, risk taking and adventure is also part of the tourist experience.

### **Adventure and Risk**

The idea of risk-taking has been understood by some theorists (Lyng, 1990; Cohen and Taylor, 1992; Urry, 1995; Lepp and Gibson, 2003; Sung, 2004; Wearing et al, 2010) as an element of the tourist experience. Many of the women I spoke to alluded to their experiences with sexual spaces as part of a risky adventure. For Marianne, an Irish woman in her early 30s in Pattaya, going to a lady boy show was certainly seen as something of an adventure. Talking about a friend who was supposed to have come to Pattaya with her, Marianne tells me she is glad that she did not come in the end because:

**Marianne:** She's not adventurous at all. She wouldn't have liked the lady boy show- she's a bit prudish- and she has a weak stomach.

Marianne's experience of going to a lady boy show suggests she understands herself as both adventurous and strong stomached; for Marianne, being unadventurous and prudish somehow exists on the same scale.

The importance of being open to different experiences was referenced in the interviews, and women in the survey who had been to a ping pong show identified with this position as well. Of the women surveyed who had been to a ping pong show, 86% agreed that they went to the show because they ‘like to experience all kinds of things’:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
‘I went to the show because I like to experience all kinds of things’ (n=29)	(n=4) 14%	(n=21) 72%	(n=1) 3%	(n=1) 3%	(n=2) 7%

For many women, being open to new experience, or ‘experiencing all kinds of things’ meant being open to going to sexual shows. There is some link here between women who were open to adventure, or not ‘prudish’, and those that saw the sex industry as a worthwhile place to explore.

For many women, going to the red light areas or to see a ping pong show was an adventure that had an element of danger, or drama attached to it. Loreta says:

**Interviewer:** How did you decide what show to go to?

**Loreta:** I think we went to a bar and we were just drinking and then got into a tuk-tuk and said ‘take us to a ping pong show’. It wasn’t really very well planned, we didn’t have a particular place in mind and we just sort of asked the guy ‘where’s good’ and he took us to a place and there was some kind of deal with drinks that sounded *extremely dodgy*, but yeah, we were just like, we were really wary I think ‘cause it’s just like this *seedy* alley and this unmarked door, with this *burly guy* standing at the door and you give your money and you’re ushered into a *dark corridor* and through a beaded curtain and it was all *dimly lit*.

**Interviewer:** It sounds strangely exciting.

**Loreta:** Yeah, it was! And I can remember being sort of like blue lighting and a bit weird, and it was, it was like a circus or something, it almost cultivated a sense of anticipation...I remember being *worried* in the tuk-tuk, being *worried* about where this guy was taking us, down these *dodgy* looking back streets to this *dodgy* looking building, and- it certainly added an element of *drama*.

Loreta's experience here was wrapped up in drinking, and her entrée into the underworld of the Thai sex industry was 'dodgy', mediated by a 'burly' doorman as they accessed the 'dimly lit' venue via a 'dark corridor'. She was 'worried' about where she was being led. The dangerous and risky elements that Loreta talks about here seem to be an important element of her overall experience with the ping pong show experience.

This sentiment was echoed by Cathy, who talks about her visit to Patpong, noting the dangerous and seedy nature of the space and suggested that she was concerned for her safety:

**Cathy:** It was like, there was pornography on sale in the market everywhere and it was very busy and I was actually quite concerned that we might get pick-pocketed or something because there did seem to be lots of people kind of hanging about...

So for Cathy there seems to be an element of danger or risk as she highlights her fear of the Thai people 'hanging about' who might be a threat, and the taboo nature of the space as there is pornography 'everywhere'.

Risk-taking is linked to notions of gender, and to the ways in which femininity is constructed as '...notions of femininity tend to represent the careful avoidance of danger and hazard as important' (Lupton, 1999:161). Chan and Rigakos (2002) also maintain that 'risk' is not a neutral term, and analyses of risk and risky behaviors need to be considered from a gendered perspective. They note: 'we contend that how women experience risk and how we view such

experiences are shaped by the politics of gender' (Chan and Rigakos, 2002:743). Lupton argues that traditional ideas about risk-taking are linked to hegemonic interpretations of masculinity: risks are for men; everyday life is for women. For men engaging in risky activities is a way of reinforcing their masculinity, as it allows them a means for displaying self-control and 'testing' themselves. For women, being responsible and conforming to the rules is part of the dominant notion of femininity. Lupton notes that women in western society are seen as victims or onlookers, and are vulnerable to assault or danger; women are seen as 'passive victims of risk rather than as active risk takers' (Lupton, 1999:161). Gendered tourism scripts in Thailand seem to defy these cultural interpretations of femininity.

These gendered notions about risk-taking provide a way to think about the corporeal reality of men's and women's experiences. Lupton suggests that in the context of tourism:

Women's bodies are culturally represented as more prone to chaos and disorder compared with men's bodies. Control over the self may therefore be even more sought after by women than by men. In this context, women who find the constraints imposed by cultural notions of femininity may seek to counter these by deliberately engaging in masculine-coded risk-taking activities or other activities that allow them to 'let go' to some extent of the control that is expected of them (1998:161).

For some women, risk-taking might allow them a chance to escape the bounded limits of femininity and the everyday responsibility that goes along with that; risk-taking allows some women to reconfigure their gendered identity within a tourist setting (Elsrud, 2001).

That element of danger, or accessing something that is dodgy speaks to the idea of the experience as edgework (Lyng, 1990; Holmes et al, 2006), a transgressive act for the women who might not normally go to strip clubs or red light areas. The particular space of Thailand puts the sex industry on the map, ushering tourists to visit this exciting, authentic, sexual

space. Women see themselves in this space as open to new adventures, and their desire to explore previously off-limit areas, to venture into seedy areas and break social taboos is something closely aligned to tourism practices more generally, and here must be considered in relation to gendered tourism practices.

Lupton (1999) has suggested that whilst dominant discourses on risk position it as negative or dangerous, risk can also be understood in a more positive way. Researchers such as Bott (2009) and Sung (2004) have suggested that people benefit from 'adventure travel', which Sung defines as: 'a trip or travel with the specific purpose of activity participation to explore a new experience, often involving *perceived risk or controlled danger*' (2004:343, emphasis added). Sung maintains that people who engage in adventure travel derive pleasure and self-actualization through their experiences, and links this to broader psychological studies on ego involvement (c.f. Sherif and Cantril, 1947).

Pizam et al (2004) support this idea with their work on risk-taking and sensation-seeking behaviors in young adults. They define sensation-seeking as: 'a trait describing the tendency to seek novel, varied, complex, and intense sensations and experiences and the willingness to take risks for the sake of such experiences' (2004: 253). They suggest that sensation-seeking is positively correlated with risky behaviors, and examine people's holiday experiences to suggest that people who were positively associated with 'sensation-seeking' often sought out adventure travel, but were also more likely to take part in activities such as drinking and frequenting bars. This suggests that risk-taking might be taking place in a number of different ways for young adult travelers, and Ferguson and Todd (2005) suggest that engaging in risky tourism activities can be a means of acquiring a kind of travel status.

The key component of these tourist experiences is that risk-taking becomes a means to attaining a new self-awareness and increasing reflexivity. Risk-taking is linked to the idea of the 'authentic', Lupton notes:

There is a sense of heightened living, of being closer to nature than culture, of breaking the 'rules' that society is seen as imposing on people. At such times, participants in such activities may attempt to experience the sublimity of losing their selves in the moment, of transcending constraints of 'civilized behavior'... Taking risks is sometimes seen as relinquishing the control of one's behavior imposed by society, stepping outside and resisting expectations, being spontaneous, seizing the day (Lupton, 1999:152-155).

There are certainly a number of links between the authentic experience of the risk-taker and the quest for the authentic by the tourist, as both risk-takers and tourists seem to be seeking out a new self-awareness by way of an authentic encounter. The next section will show how these risky or adventurous expeditions into sexualized spaces became a way for women to demonstrate their traveler kudos, revealing their knowledge of the sex industry to friends/family and other travelers.

### **Demonstrating Cultural Knowledge**

In my interview with Alison in Phuket, she tells me that although part of the reason that she went to the cabaret was to tell her 'gay friends at home' that she had been to a deviant, sexualized space:

**Alison:** I wouldn't see the lip-syncing cabaret again, but then again I do love the stage costumes and all that goes along with it, and 10 out of 10 for whoever does the costumes, they are divine, they are to die for. I've never seen so many sequins and feathers- but it all comes together beautifully. I guess for the fact that I've got lots of gay friends at home and to them it would be amusing that I've actually gone and seen a show like that and let them know –'its right up your alley darling go and see that.'

For Alison, going to see a sexual show that she sees as gay oriented is a way to impress her gay friends back in Australia, and to demonstrate her knowledge of Thailand and alternative or deviant sexualities. This desire to share their experiences of the sex industry was telling, and in some cases women wanted to demonstrate this 'knowledge' in a more concrete way. Many women acted as cultural brokers for novice tourists, demonstrating their expertise about Thai culture and about deviant sexual Others.

Westerhausen highlights the importance of attaining a cultural knowledge about a particular destination, as he suggests that 'a hierarchy of knowledge exists within the [traveler] subculture, with newcomers seeking out experienced travelers to gather relevant information' (2002: 78). The 'experienced' travelers will know something about the sexual spaces and shows in Thailand, and Diane and Elizabeth suggest that the ping pong shows were a cultural experience that everyone 'has' to see. On her first visit to Thailand Elizabeth was taken by a knowledgeable colleague to a show that was so horrible it was indescribable:

**Elizabeth:** The first time I was in Bangkok I was with a colleague of mine who knew Bangkok- he took us the whole crew to a place I will never forget. The worst place in Bangkok I guess- to a show I will never forget. Quite a show I don't think I could describe it. I saw everything!

**Diane:** They had to pay for it though!

**Elizabeth:** Yeah we had to pay and they said 100 baht and we had to pay more when we left or else they wouldn't let us out!

**Interviewer:** Have you been to other shows since then?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, I've been to other shows- not the same show. But I have to take colleagues- they want to see- not only me

**Diane:** It's like, everybody has to see the shows.

Now Elizabeth tells me that she ‘has’ to take colleagues. Her multiple trips to Thailand and her various visits to the sex industry mean that she has become, in a sense, a tour guide for her uninitiated colleagues. They look to her to take them to the ‘worst’ places to see shows that are so horrible they defy description. This was a common theme for many of the participants who had been to Thailand multiple times. Women suggested they were best placed to initiate other novice tourists into the sex industry, and became unofficial guides for these green, inexperienced tourists who did not know how to access these authentic Thai sites/sights. Andrea also highlights her role as guide/cultural broker for uninitiated tourists:

**Andrea:** I’d stay over [in Bangkok] for a few weeks at a time and I remember going to Patpong on numerous occasions- it was almost like- I remember on one occasion I was staying on the Khao San Road and I met a couple of girls from New Zealand and they said they hadn’t been and I said ‘Oh in that case I’ve got to take you!’ It was a bit like that, if you knew Thailand really well you’d just say you know- it’s an experience, you’ve got to go...

For both Elizabeth and Andrea, taking others to a ping pong show marks them out as an aficionado of Thailand- they have the relevant cultural capital (or perhaps ‘travel capital’) to take other novice tourists who have never seen the sex industry in Thailand- and thereby demonstrate their position as cultural experts. Their ability to initiate other tourists into these sexualized spaces demonstrates their cultural knowledge, and suggests that they are knowledgeable enough about Thailand and Thai culture to have navigated this sexualized terrain numerous times.

Loreta, who wrote about her experience in her group email that she sent to friends and family members back home, comments about the experience of telling others about seeing a ping pong show:

**Interviewer:** And did any of your friends react to it- did you get any emails back from people who were surprised or anything?

**Loreta:** Um, no, I don't think anyone really batted an eyelid- I mean when I told people after that I went to a show they were like 'OOOH! What's that like?' And you're like uh - 'it's a bit horrible, and the razor blades, let me tell you about those, but um it was a bit kind of like oh my gosh' - that's a bit shocking, a bit weird, yeah I told people about it, but not in a 'guess what I did it was so fantastic'.

The contradiction on Loreta's account here - whereby no one 'batted' an eye yet they were also 'like OOOH', suggests that the experience is both out of the ordinary - 'a bit shocking, a bit weird', but the fact that she had gone to one of these shows was not out of the ordinary. The experience was an exciting one, but not uncommon for a seasoned traveler.

Coming back to adventure and risk-taking here, we can see how risk taking combines with knowledge of the sex industry as a way of achieving a type of 'traveler capital' (Elsrud, 2001). Elsrud (2001) suggests that women travelers who engaged with risks, seeking out difference and novelty as part of their tourist experience, felt empowered by their adventurous activities, and their willingness to engage in these types of 'risky' activities suggests they align themselves with more masculine tourism identities. For the female travelers in Elsrud's study and the female participants in Thailand, consuming adventurous holiday activities allowed them to gain an elevated position on the tourist hierarchy and earned a type of cultural, or travelers capital.

This was also true for many of the women I spoke with, who suggest that consuming the sex industry became a way of accruing a kind of capital, and their visits were something that could (and should) be reflected back to the friends or relatives. Their visits positioned them as cultural experts. As Loreta notes, she told friends and family about her visit to the sex industry because it was something 'out of the ordinary' that people might not 'normally' do:

**Loreta:** ...I think I told people in the email as well- it was kinda like a 'Oh guess what I did on holiday' because it's certainly something out of the ordinary that you wouldn't normally do, so yeah I did tell people about it- I wasn't ashamed about it...

Loreta wants to tell her family about this novel, exciting experience she had, and it was like 'oh, guess what I did on holiday' – suggesting she was quite proud of this, certainly not 'ashamed' in any way about accessing this kind of entertainment. Ferguson and Todd note that travelers work to gather 'experiences', 'to retell to their significant others during and after their travels, but were also willing to re-tell their experiences to other immediate groups... This implies that these experiences are consumed not only for internal satisfaction, but for the ability to retell post consumption, in search of social approval' (2005: 153).

### **Consumption Processes and the Sex Industry**

The consumption of these types of tourist/sexual experiences can be better understood if we think about consumption as a part of set of cultural or social practices. Post-structuralism has had a profound influence on the way that consumption as a practice is understood. Bourdieu (1986) wrote extensively about the processes of consumption, and the ideas that he engages with are important for understanding touristic patterns of consumption more generally. Bourdieu argues that part of the reason that people consume particular items is that buying is linked to status and social class. He argues that different social groups have access to different modes of power, which he suggests can be understood as various forms of 'capital'. These different modes of capital can present themselves in a variety of guises:

...as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized

in the form of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of the title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986:47, original emphasis)

Bourdieu argues that people consume as a way of expressing their social status/position as a means of differentiating themselves from other groups. Bocoock argues that: 'Consumption, therefore, can be seen as a set of social and cultural practices which serve as a way of establishing differences between social groups, not merely as a way of expressing differences which are already in place as a result of an autonomous set of economic factors' (Bocoock, 1993: 64). Consumption is 'eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive' (Appadurai, 1986:31), and works to 'send a message' about the person who is consuming; the 'tastes' of modern consumers and demand for products are 'socially regulated and generated impulse[s], not an artifact of individual whims or needs (Appadurai: 1986:32). Furthermore, cultural and symbolic factors work to influence the way people consume, which suggests that 'cultural capital' is of particular relevance when it comes to matters of 'taste':

...the capacity to buy and read novels, to buy paintings, to attend the theatre or cinema, sporting events, musical concerts of all kinds, are to be seen as components of consumption. They require not only expenditure of money and time (leisure time), but also such activities depend upon a set of acquired tastes for specific aesthetic, or even sporting, events. Such tastes have to be created, developed and cultivated.... Peer groups and families [can] affect taste (Bocoock, 1993: 66).

Part of the process of consumption is that, when people consume, they are consuming signs that are linked to the creation of a self-identity (Baudrillard, 1988). The symbols and signs of consumption 'do not express an already pre-existing set of meanings. The meanings are

generated within the system of signs/symbols which engages the attention of the consumer... Consumption is... conceptualized as a process in which a purchaser of an item is actively engaged in trying to create and maintain a sense of identity through the display of purchased goods' (Bocock: 1993:67). In this way, consumption is not just about satisfying needs, but is rather wrapped up in a complex social process whereby people create and sustain identities through/with the things or experiences that they buy: 'People create a sense of who they are through what they consume' (Bocock: 1993, 67).

Bourdieu's notion of habitus also links into the social scripts that drive our everyday social practices. Bourdieu argues:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment . . . produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations (Bourdieu, 1977:72).

Lawler suggests that Bourdieu's concept of habitus 'includes a literal in-corp-oration so that social relations become part of the body - how we stand, how we move, how we look and how we feel... It is a way of analysing how social relations become constituted within the self, but also how the self is constituted by social relations' (2008: 129). Understandings of the social world, and what particular people/groups understand as acceptable behavior in a given context (or in a particular place) depends on their class position, their ethnic background, and their gender. The processes that drive consumption are linked into the way we perform our identity, and more than that the ways that we perform our gendered, sexed, raced, and ethnic identity (Goffman, 1959; Bourdieu, 1986; Shields, 1991; Casey and Martins, 2007).

## **Consumption and Desire: Consuming Difference**

Consumption, then, is not an insignificant process, as 'consumer-oriented actions are highly significant in the psychic lives of millions of ordinary people. The images, the representations, tap into unconscious desires, as well as desires of a more conscious kind' (Bocock: 1993: 90). What we buy helps to construct 'who we are'- and how we decide what to buy is influenced by friends, family, and peers, but also by our unconscious desires: 'Desires, both those socially, culturally learned from peer groups and the surrounding symbols in the wider culture, and those discovered to lie in, or to be thrusting up from, the unconscious play a central role in the ways in which consumers in post-modern capitalism construct their social identity' (Bocock: 1993: 108). Indeed consumption seems to be one of the central mechanisms people use in defining themselves: 'Commodities are not just objects of economic exchange; they are goods to think with, goods to speak with' (Fiske in Bocock, 1993:96). The goods we buy help provide some kind of self-identity in a post-modern world, and this identity is necessarily gendered, classed, and raced.

The consumption of specific goods or items should be linked with the concept of desire; the things that people desire are predicated upon social relations: '...cultural values, patterns, beliefs, symbols, and practices do exert considerable influence [on what people desire]; they set the main parameters within which adults choose on the basis of what they see as their best 'desires' (Bocock, 1993: 82). These desires are not produced by biology- the innate desires of the body- but are rather produced 'at the point where cultural conceptions, signifiers, hook into the body's capacities for sexual, erotic activities and its capacity for aggression' (Bocock, 1993: 88).

There is some suggestion that, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, consuming transgression is a way of accruing cultural capital. Sonnet argues that 'sexuality has become inextricable from consumption' (1992: 177) and women are increasingly consuming what may be considered

transgressive sexual material in an effort to express and explore their gendered and/or sexual identity. Binnie and Skeggs, writing about straight women's invasion of gay spaces in Manchester, argue that 'Cosmopolitanism, as a claim to authority, as a way of achieving unspoken sophistication is always classed and sexed. Certain objects are chosen to enable cosmopolitanism to be achieved. These objects (or groups) have already been allocated cultural value and are used to bolster the cultural capitals of the user' (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004:52). Furthermore, the way particular spaces are configured, and particular tourist destinations understood, impacts upon what is seen as fashionable and what types of spaces become signified as culturally relevant or desirable (McCabe and Marson, 2006). The social, gendered scripts that determine what experiences we desire, how we position these desires as part of our identity, and how class and ethnicity determine these desires are all relevant for understanding women's *desire* to interact with these sexual spaces in Thailand.

The consumption of travel has long been understood as a way of establishing and/or sustaining a particular identity (Simmel, 1911; Veblen 1912). Tourists have long sought out 'difference' (and even danger) as part of their tourist experiences (Light, 1974), and consumption processes of tourism are inextricably wrapped up in this desire for the exotic/different Other. In the case of Thailand, the sex industry and female sex workers are configured as objects that have cultural values, and many of the female participants use their knowledge of sexualized spaces/places to bolster their own cultural, 'travel' capital.

It is important to restate here that a key part of tourism processes are tourists desires to consume difference (Sanchez Taylor, 2000); being cosmopolitan also links to a desire to consume particular types of difference (Nava, 2002) and in the particular space of Thailand some western women seem to recognize the value in consuming exotic/erotic/different Others. Indeed their tourist experiences with the sex industry adheres to what might be seen as a 'cosmopolitan' outlook that links to '...a shared cultural capital which is committed to glamour, hedonism, and anti-pretentiousness' (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004:53). On the one hand

going to a sex show or visiting a cabaret does seem to demonstrate a commitment from western women to explore what they see as authentic, but on the other hand lets them imagine themselves as open to new experiences and willing to try anything. It seems that visiting these shows may allow women tourists to show their traveler capital, or perhaps able to demonstrate their adventurous nature, and reveal to other tourists their cultural knowledge about deviant/authentic sexual spaces. It is possible that this kind of interaction may also allow for a reinterpretation of gendered identities, by engaging in spaces and visiting places that might normally be off-limits to women.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has worked to show that western women tourists are able to access sexualized spaces in Thailand. Many of the research participants situate their interactions with eroticized areas as part of a 'normal' tourist visit. The sex industry, seen by many as an authentic or a must-see experience, was consumed visually by many of the female tourists in the study. Wearing suggests '...there has been an emphasis on tourism as a means of escape from everyday life, even if such escape is temporary'. Furthermore, travel has also '...been constructed as a means of self-development, a way to broaden the mind, experience the new and different and return in some way enriched' (Wearing, 2002:244). This double emphasis, on tourism as a means of escape and on tourism as a way of attaining knowledge/enrichment, certainly functions for many of the women who participated in the research, and the experience of seeing sexual shows or visiting sexualized areas is seen as both fun and entertaining, and a possibly a way of demonstrating one's traveler credentials.

However, tourism consumption relies heavily upon ideas of difference, the exotic, the erotic, and the Other (Lewis and Pile, 1996; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Johnston, 2001; 2002; Wearing et al, 2010). Western women tourists in Thailand may be open to new experiences and trying new things, and may in fact want to learn something about Thai culture, but the

fact that they are in Thailand, the fact that they can afford a (relatively) overpriced beer in a ping pong show, the fact that they as white women are allowed into the shows when Thai women visitors are often denied entry (Phongpaichit et al, 1998), all suggest that they have access to a wide range of capital that locates them in a relative position of power over the Others they consume. This thesis does not suggest that sex workers in Thailand are powerless, but rather posits that western women tourists are in a relatively powerful position (economically, socially, and culturally) vis-à-vis the sex workers they visually consume. The pretence of the sex industry as a mere tourist experience is problematic in that it hides this power imbalance. The reality is that Thai sex workers are often cast as objects of the tourist gaze, commodified and objectified not only by male sex tourists but by western women tourists as well.

The next chapter will look more closely at the ways some western women describe their experiences with the sex industry, and how they understand their interactions with the Others (Thai sex workers and western male sex tourists) they encounter there. Participants' descriptions of their interactions with sexual venues reveal an ambivalent position in their assessment of the status of themselves in relation to the Others in these spaces. Interview and survey data shows how respondents describe their experiences of visiting sexual spaces/places, and the reactions they have to sexual shows will reveal the complex nature of women's engagements with erotic entertainment. Some western women situate their visual, tourist interactions with these spaces as unproblematic because they are able to compare their behavior with that of the 'real' (male) sex tourists. This distinction, though, is problematic because despite women's desire to authentically engage, they use essentialist stereotypes to understand Thai women, and only see some western male tourists as problematic, while others are saved from the stigma of the sex tourist label. These inconsistencies will be highlighted and I will demonstrate that many women's tourist interactions with sexual spaces are problematic, despite their claims to authenticity.



## **Chapter Five: The Sex Industry as ‘Already There’: Women Tourists and the Problematic Others of the Sex Industry**

### **Introduction**

The sex industry in Thailand occupies a unique position, painted as part of Thai culture and understood by many tourists as an authentic site for touristic interaction. Some of the participants, regardless of whether or not they actually engaged with the sex industry, felt that the sex industry was part of a normal range of tourist practices, and some of these western women saw ping pong shows and red light areas as spaces where they could and should be interacting. Chapter Four suggested that for some women, their embodied experiences of tourism, their desire for an exciting tourist moment, and their ability to pass themselves off as ‘cultural experts’ to other tourists helped to facilitate their passage into the darker spaces of tourism in Thailand.

This chapter will go further in interpreting women’s understandings of the sex industry, exploring their assessment of their interactions with these spaces and will explore two research questions. Firstly, how do western women understand their presence at the shows in relation to other tourists who also occupy these spaces? Secondly, how do western women position themselves in relation to the Thai sex workers they encounter?

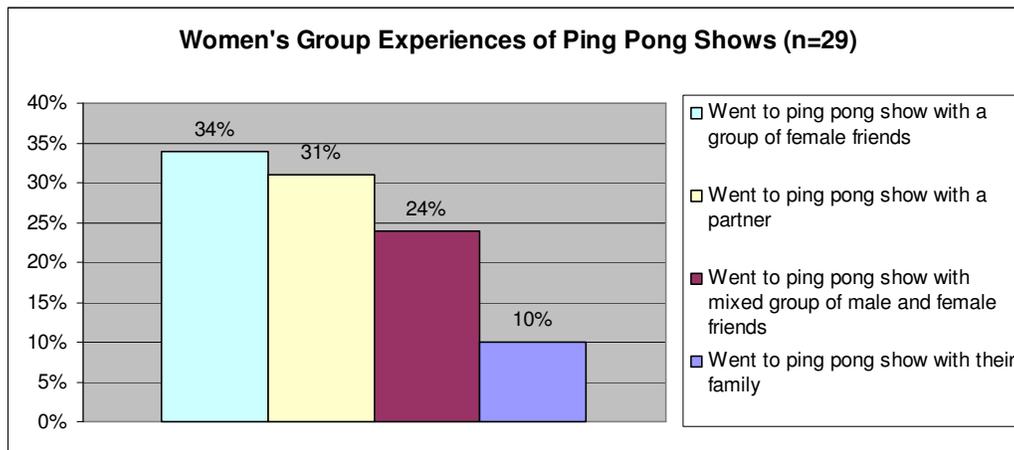
The empirical data presented in this chapter suggests that western women do not consider their engagement with the sex industry problematic: rather they see their entrée into these sexualized areas as motivated by purely touristic desires, and largely ignore the sexual element of the shows. This adherence to a tourist script means that certain Others occupying these sexual spaces must be made sense of, and the way that some western women understand tourist men (and sex tourist men), as well as the Thai sex workers in these zones reveals a good deal about how they construct their own tourist identity in Thailand. This chapter will

highlight the ambivalences and inconstancies in women's narratives about the Others located in the sexual spaces of Thailand, as they try to explain their own desire to see and interact with these 'tourist' areas.

### The Sex Industry as Group Experience

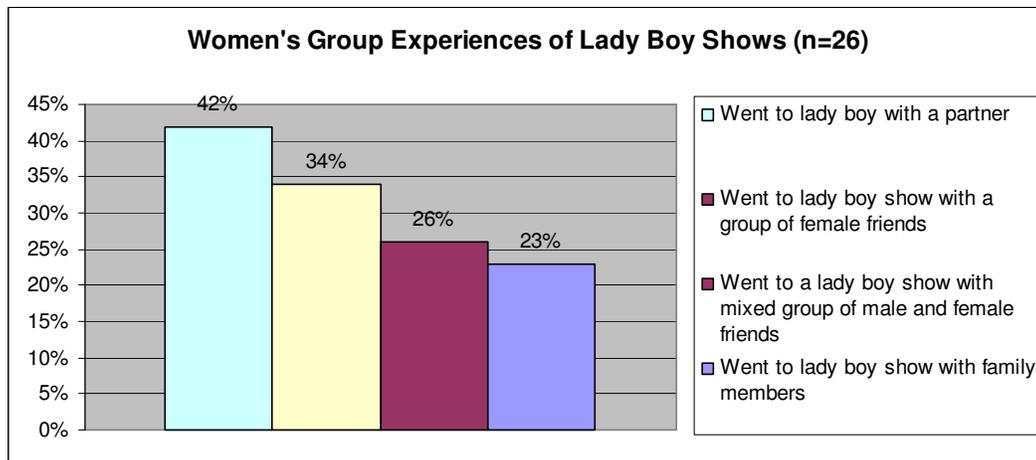
The sex industry was understood by many of the participants as something that should be accessed as part of a group. The survey data suggests that visiting sexual places is almost always something that women do as part of a group or couples experience. Of the women who had been to ping pong shows in Thailand, none of the women had been to a show on their own (see Figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1**



Of the women who had been to a ladyboy show in Thailand, only 1 woman of these 26 had been on her own. For the rest, their interaction was more varied (see Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2**



By and large the women in the study did not visit these spaces by themselves, rather they went as part of a group and this group engagement impacted their understanding of the sexual spaces/places they encountered.

This collective outing is important, as the tourist gaze is collectively arranged and organized. Urry (1995; 2002) makes a distinction between different types of touristic gazes, and suggests that the 'collective gaze' in tourism depends upon other tourists to ascribe meaning to specific sites/sights. The collective gaze is subject to the process of 'signposting', whereby certain spaces are demarcated as suitable for the collective gaze: '...signposts are designed to help people congregate and are in a sense an important element of the collective tourist gaze. Visitors come to learn that they can congregate in certain places and that is where the collective gaze will take place' (Urry, 1995: 139).

Loreta suggests that one of the reasons she wanted to see the ping pongshow was because it was popular on the backpacking circuit, something that she'd heard about from word of mouth and felt that she wanted to experience herself. Loreta suggested that the ping pong show, the amazing show hyped up by fellow backpackers, was something that was a key item on the tourist itinerary. Loreta explicitly acknowledges the importance of learning about the event from fellow travelers and how this influenced her decision to see the show in the first place:

**Interviewer:** So you'd heard all these people talk about it and thought- this is something I have to try?

**Loreta:** Yeah, pretty much, I mean people were saying 'it's like nothing you've ever seen before, it will blow your mind', you know, not necessarily in a good way, but it's something that you kind of need to do - 'it needs to be seen to be believed' sort of thing and to be honest with the other local attractions in Bangkok, the temples and such, they were nice, but no one ever said 'it blew my mind, I've never seen anything like it' - so it was a bit of a tourist attraction situation.

The show becomes part of Loreta's tourist experience, something that 'blew her mind' and had to be 'seen to be believed'. The visual focus is important as it suggests that the tourist discourse on the sex industry relates to the gaze. As shown in Chapter Four, both guidebooks and word of mouth from other tourists inform people's understandings of the sex industry- the sex industry comes to be seen as an authentic site for tourists to consume, where women want to experience Thailand through red light areas, ping pong shows, and lady boy shows.

As Chapter Four argues, this interaction is not only based upon understandings of the Thai sex industry as normal/touristic, but also relies on cultural and social processes in determining the touristic identity. In this instance, the group process of visiting sexualized spaces is about focusing the touristic gaze on a 'cultural' activity that marks women as 'insiders'. Shields argues that people:

...ascribe to particular discourses about places as a mark of their 'insider status' in particular groups and communities. This group affiliation through knowledge of discourses which locate places and areas as particular types of places, with particular relations to other places and people (outsiders) does not restrict the development of personal views of 'the real situation' (Shields 1991:25).

Again, we can see how the particular space and place of Thailand becomes important in some women's positioning of the sex industry, as they are able to cultivate their touristic identity within the group consumption of the sex industry, and mark themselves as 'insiders' who can talk about their experience of this authentic site/sight.

Both Elizabeth and Diane readily admitted to their fascination with the sex industry, and note the importance of going to look at and see the spectacle, but Elizabeth also admits to taking her colleagues to see the shows. This segment from their interview is worth noting again, as they highlight how the spectacle of the sex industry is something that *everyone* wants to see:

**Elizabeth:** The first time I was in Bangkok I was with a colleague of mine who knew Bangkok- he took us the whole crew to a place I will never forget. The worst place in Bangkok I guess- to a show I will never forget. Quite a show I don't think I could describe it. I saw everything!

**Diane:** They had to pay for it though!

**Elizabeth:** Yeah we had to pay and they said 100 baht and we had to pay more when we left or else they wouldn't let us out!

**Interviewer:** Have you been to other shows since then?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, I've been to other shows- not the same show. But I have to take colleagues- they want to see- not only me

**Diane:** It's like, everybody has to see the shows.

Elizabeth had been to a variety of shows over a number of visits to Thailand, and suggests here that she feels she had to take her colleagues to see the shows as well. The ping pong shows are something that everybody must see on their visit to Thailand, even if the show is the 'worst place' in Bangkok. The visual engagement and the group experience are both highlighted here as key aspects of the tourist experience.

As seen in Chapter Three, the tourist industry highlights the sex industry as a must see, and the sex industry comes to occupy a strange position where groups of tourists visit this authentic space. Ping pong shows in particular are strangely situated, as there is an awareness that the shows are a tourist experience, that they exist for tourist consumption, but somehow act as a sign and symbol of the Thai sexuality. Sexual contact between (sex) tourists and sex workers takes place in a private setting. While sex tourists may meet sex workers in a public place like a bar or sex show, the intimate relations happen behind closed doors. Further, it is difficult to say for certain who is actually a sex tourists - they do not wear any visible outward signs that immediately mark them out as such, nor do sex workers, who may be difficult to recognize out of the space of a sexual show. But the sexual shows offer a space where tourists can come in groups to publicly consume the sex industry, being confident that the women on stage are indeed sex workers and the men are sex tourists. This may not be the first time women are seeing aspects of the sex industry, but here they are allowed to see more than the public manifestations of the sex industry and witness these sexual deviants firsthand. The importance of the group experience in constructing a 'gazing performance' where tourists visit particular sites 'in a group and perform a shared, appreciative form of gazing' (Edensor, 2001: 73) can be seen with many of the female participants' interactions with sexual spaces. This group aspect of the gaze suggests that this engagement is read as a touristic engagement, rather than as a sexual engagement.

The importance of going to see the public performances as a group is something that many women participants highlighted in their narratives, and this group encounter of the sex industry was something that western women incorporate into their description of their decisions to see (or their anticipated desire to explore) the sex industry. In an interview with Anna who had just arrived in Bangkok that day, I ask her if she'd like to see a ping pong show at some point during her visit:

**Interviewer:** Do you think that going to the ping pong show would be fun?

**Anna:** I don't know. I don't think it's fun, no. I think it's a little bit sad. Women doing things with their bodies and dancing, seducing...So I don't know if it's really fun. I'm interested in what it is but it's not, 'OK, I'm interested so I'm going to see it.' Maybe if I come by a show that's going on I will visit it but not on my own.

Anna, while seemingly reluctant to visit a ping pong show, admits that she might be tempted to go to a show (despite the fact that she would find it sad and 'no fun'), but not on her own.

In Phuket, Beth also suggests she would be interested in going to a ping pong show, but again notes that she would not go on her own:

**Interviewer:** Have you been to a ping pong show or anything like that?

**Beth:** No, but I would like to go just to experience it but I'd feel a bit funny going on my own. It may look a little bit weird.

Edensor (2001) suggests that tourist behaviors are culturally coded and related to a shared notion of what tourist practices should entail. He suggests: 'particular tourist contexts generate a shared set of conventions about what should be seen, what should be done, and which actions are appropriate. Such shared norms instantiate a way of being...[and] forms of tourist habitus are also determined by unreflexive, embodied, shared assumptions about appropriate behavior in particular contexts' (2001: 60). These participants desire to engage with sexual spaces, but only as part of a group, suggests that they are adhering to a tourist script where visiting sexual spaces becomes acceptable practice when other tourists come along. Perhaps it can be argued that these then become read as tourist spaces, rather than sexual spaces - a point I'll return to in a moment.

None of the participants had been to a ping pong show on their own and, as these excerpts demonstrate, women felt reluctant to visit these spaces by themselves. Many highlighted the importance of going in a group, or indeed suggested that the only reason they would go themselves would be to see the show with a group of people. As well, women tourists suggested that going to see the sex industry would be a way to satisfy their curiosity about these types of spaces.

Gemma, a German woman in her late 20s staying in Chiang Mai, explicitly acknowledges her interest in the show, but caveats this by saying she would only go to join a friend or fellow tourist who was interested in visiting this type of venue:

**Interviewer:** Do you have any interest in going to the red light area in Bangkok?

**Gemma:** We went past it. I met a girl and she asked me if I wanted to see it. I don't know if I really wanted to see it but I'm interested in what people are doing and why. I really would like to find out what it is like for the woman too. For that reason I would go there but I think it's just another kind of stupid tourism just going there for that. So if it happening and I am near I would walk through it but it's not the real plan to go there.

Going to a red light area for Gemma is something she did with another tourist, although her equivocation about just going 'past it' somehow suggests that, while she was on the border, she never actually entered the fray, despite her visual consumption of the space. She highlights the importance of the group experience again later:

**Interviewer:** So would you go to a ping pong show?

**Gemma:** Yes, that would be something I would do if someone else said, 'OK, I want to see it.' I would join them for sure.

Gemma insists here that she would only see a ping pong show if someone else wanted to see it. This type of reasoning allowed some of the women to focus on this group experiential aspect, while ignoring the sexual aspects of their engagement. Going to a ping pong show as a group is something that they do as a tourist group, rather than as part of a sexual outing or a sexual experience.

The group experience also troubles women's understandings of men's interactions in these spaces. To understand ping pong shows as a tourist experience, and as a group tourist experience, means that the identity of the entire group has to be configured along these non-sexual lines. Indeed, if women understand their boyfriends or male friends to be turned on or sexually aroused by the entertainment it might necessitate a reevaluation of the group experience, and perhaps they might have to reconsider their own sexuality as part of this.

In an interview with Loreta, she tells me about her conception of the 'types' of tourists she had imagined to be visiting ping pong shows:

**Interviewer:** So you didn't really know about it before you went?

**Loreta:** No I didn't know much about it at all, I'd heard about it as sort of a jokey reference but I didn't really know what it meant and I certainly didn't think it would be the type of thing that tourists would go to- well perhaps tourists as in western businessmen but I didn't think it would be the kind of thing that was like, 'oh let's go to the cinema, oh, no, let's go to a ping pong show'.

**Interviewer:** Was that kind of how it worked?

**Loreta:** I think we'd been there a few days and we'd been around the temples and we had a train to catch the next day or something and everyone in the bars, all the sort of young westerners, backpacker westerners had been talking about the show, 'I did this, I saw that, it was amazing', amazing in the 'I've never seen anything like it oh my god' rather than the amazing as 'what a thing of great beauty'... something of a freak

show....Yeah it was me and two guy friends and me and one of the guys was quite keen to go and we might have gone with another guy from our hostel, he might have gone the day before or something but he certainly knew all about it anyway.

For Loreta, she imagined the space of the sex show as masculine and sexual. She thought there would be western 'businessmen' (read sex tourist), but her group experience of the show was more 'touristy' and fascinating than sexual. Her understanding of the desire of the western male tourists she did go with is different to her understanding of the desires of western 'businessmen':

**Interviewer:** And what was the atmosphere like- did most people find it funny or entertaining- or were people getting turned on by it?

**Loreta:** I don't really see how you could get turned on by it- you'd have to be quite peculiar. It wasn't very sexual, it was very much an element of performance and a slight uncomfortable performance....It didn't really have a sexual feel at all I don't think and the two guys I went with said certainly not at all for them- um they felt that it was quite- they felt a bit uncomfortable with it like bad they'd been and seen what all the fuss was about- you know to have the full Thailand experience so to speak- but I don't think they were in a mad hurry to go back and do it again.

Loreta makes it clear that not only did she not find the show sexual, but makes it clear that the male tourists she went with did not find the show sexual either. Many of the participants understood that the kind of men that would be interested in these shows for prurient reasons (sex tourists) must be different somehow to the 'normal' tourist men who they visit these spaces with.

Indeed, many of the women had a difficult time making sense of their male friends' or boyfriends' interactions with and reactions to female sex workers. Christina, an Australian

girl in her late teens, talks about her experiences on Bangla Road in Phuket. She was on a group holiday with male and female friends, and despite telling me that she was shocked and disturbed by much of what happened on Bangla Road, her and her mates had been almost every night of their trip. She notes:

**Christina:** ...the boys have been hassled- they say they've been hassled- they're all like 'massage you want massage' and grabbed our friends and we're like 'eugh' - and when they get a massage they're like 'we'll be your girlfriend tonight' and stuff like that.

Her qualification here is also interesting, as rather than simply telling me that the boys had been hassled, she makes a point to note they have *said* they are being hassled, because being touched and solicited by sex workers could be understood in a variety of ways other than 'hassle'.

Cathy, who had been to a show with her boyfriend and his male friend, conveys this complicated reading:

**Interviewer:** And what about the other guys there, what did you think about the other men at the show?

**Cathy:** I think, they were- most of them were American- well a lot of them, some of them were German- just kind of a similar thing really, they were either very loud and masculine and a bit drunk or they were kind of like, very shy and in awe and hiding in the corner.

**Interviewer:** And were they aroused by the show, do you think, was that the sort of general...

**Cathy:** I really don't know to be honest- I don't know, it seems a bit odd to go somewhere with your friends and then get off on it- but I'm not sure I quite get the

whole thing anyway- but no I don't think so, I think it was all part of the general Thailand tourist thing to be honest.

Again, the touristic aspect of the show is highlighted, and Cathy makes her confusion clear; she does not say she thinks the men were not turned on, rather she says she thinks it would be:

**Cathy:** ... a bit odd to go somewhere with your friends and then get off on it.

Her own interpretation of the experience impacts upon her interpretation of the male tourists' experience as well, and her awareness of the other social actors in this scene suggests that she was watching more than just the sex workers on stage. Cathy can tell me the nationality of the other men there, what they looked like, how they were acting, and how much they had to drink. Her awareness of the western men in this space suggests that Cathy was visually consuming the entire space as part of the spectacle.

This was also true for Loreta who had been to a ping pong show with a group of male tourists, but points out that her earlier interpretations of these kinds of shows had been built around the assumption that 'western businessmen' might want to explore these sights, but not 'normal' tourists.

**Interviewer:** Who made up the audience?

**Loreta:** Other tourists, white western tourists with a partner usually, a boyfriend or husband.

**Interviewer:** In twos then?

**Loreta:** Yeah, uh, mostly in twos and a couple of small groups- three or four people.

**Interviewer:** Anyone that you'd classify as a sex tourist?

**Loreta:** Apart from the couples, the other people, mostly men, like single men, western men, but also some sort of Thai looking men but it was unclear whether they

were there for the show or they worked there or had some other link to it- they were drinking at the bar or lurking in the background.

Loreta as well has paid attention to the environment of the sexual show, taking in details about who was there, how they acted, what they were doing and so on. Her awareness of the other men in the space, the sex tourists(single western men) and some ‘Thai looking’ men lurking in the background, were clearly a part of the experience of the show, and a detail that was worth remembering. Some of the participants position the ‘sex tourists’ they encounter as part of the spectacle of the sex industry, but the male tourists they visit these spaces with are understood as non-interested in the sexual aspects and positioned as co-viewers, rather than ‘real’ participants.

### **Desexualizing the Sex Industry**

Women did not just deny that the show might be sexual for their male counterparts, but emphasized that they did not find the shows sexual in any way at all.

Almost all of the women surveyed categorically denied any sexual arousal from their experiences with sexual spaces/places. 97% of women who had been to a ping pong show disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: ‘I found the show arousing, I was really turned on by it’.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
‘I found the show arousing, I was really turned on by it’ (n=29)	(n=0) 0%	(n=1) 3%	(n=0) 0%	(n=11) 38%	(n=17) 59%

None of the women that I spoke with, both formally and informally, ever suggested they found the show sexual or erotic themselves. Interview after interview elicited the same response from participants, who were adamant that they would not find the shows sexually arousing:

**Interviewer:** So you would do it for fun [go to see a ping pong show]? You wouldn't find it sexually arousing in any way at all?

**Callie:** No, not at all. Not personally.

**Interviewer:** Why would you want to go see it [a ping pong show]?

**Beth:** Just interested really but not in a sexual way.

**Interviewer:** So you don't think that it would be arousing?

**Beth:** Oh my God, NO! Not at all! More for the experience...

**Interviewer:** You don't think that it [a ping pong show] would be sexual?

**Gemma:** I have no idea what it would be like. For me, it would not be sexual interest but just to have seen it once for touristic reasons.

**Interviewer:** Did you find the [ping pong] show sexual in any way?

**Mandy:** No. It didn't do owt for me. Definitely not, no. Not even when they were doing the three way thing, no<sup>29</sup>.

Women suggested a variety of alternative interpretations of their engagement here. They would go because they want an experience, or because it is a tourist site, or because they are interested in seeing what happened in these spaces. Many women highlighted the visual aspects, the touristic aspects, the exciting aspects, but none of the interviewees ever suggested

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<sup>29</sup> Here Mandy is referring to part of the show that featured three women engaging sexual activities together on stage.

that they went to see the show for sexual entertainment, nor did they find the shows sexual, or suggest that their interaction with these spaces had any sexual element. The vehemence with which most women denied they might be aroused by the show was surprising, and many of the women who had seen the show told me not only did they not find the show arousing, they did not see how anyone could be sexually aroused by the content of the erotic events. Ella said:

**Interviewer:** Why do you think people go and see [ping pong shows]?

**Ella:** A lot of it would just be interest just to see how they do it. Even the thought of it – Yuk! It can't be for a turn on. I wouldn't have thought that would do it for anybody.

Despite the protestations of female tourists, it is difficult to deny that these shows—particularly ping pong shows—are sexual. Many of the shows simulate sexual encounters, giving audiences visual access to what would normally be a private, intimate exchange between two (or three) people. That being said, many of the tricks performed also include activities that would not normally feature in a private sexual experience, but they always involve naked women, clearly display vaginas, anuses, breasts and have what Simon and Gagnon (1999) would describe as a high density of sexual cues.

Sex and sexuality are constructed and (co)created, molded in relation to affective elements of culture. Simon and Gagnon (1999) have written about the importance of society in shaping gendered sexual scripts, and highlight the ways in which the social impacts upon our understanding of sexuality:

From a scripting perspective, the sexual is not viewed as an intrinsically significant aspect of human behavior; rather, the sexual is viewed as becoming significant either when it is defined as such by collective life- *sociogenic significance*; or when

individual experiences of development assign it a special significance- *ontogenic significance* (1999:30, original emphasis).

These two factors, they argue, are closely related, and act as social settings where the 'sexual takes on a strong meaning and successful performance or avoidance of what is defined as sexual plays a major role in the evaluation of individual competence and worth' (1999:30). Sexual scripts mean that sometimes scenarios or settings that might be understood as having a 'high density of external sexual cues' (1999:30) may not be understood as 'sexual' by all individuals or conversely, situations with a lower density of sexual cues may be understood as 'sexual' by other individuals. These sexual cues are critically important to our understanding of what is meant by 'sexual' in a given culture.

However, the historical development of theorizations on sexuality has often been based on (western) sexist assumptions about the nature of women's sexuality. The idea of a powerful or autonomous female sexual identity has been seen as threatening (Simon and Gagnon, 1999:33) and as such the sexual scripts that women have traditionally been afforded are often understood as un-sexual, or sexual as a response to (real) male sexuality.

Additionally, the importance of identity and understanding the 'self' in relation to the 'other' has been highlighted in sexual script theory. The 'others' in sexual scenes help to establish and define our selves, with 'the experience of the other becoming a metaphor for the self' (Simon and Gagnon, 1999:33). However, these processes that mark out sexual identity can be disrupted by changes in status or changes in context and these changes necessitate a renegotiation of the self. This idea of sexual scripting is relevant for the women in this study, who derive and understand their own sexual scripts in accordance with the western sexual scripts available to them.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, women are somewhat less likely to visit sexual shows where there are male sex workers. Only 28% of women wanted to visit a go-go bar with male dancers, and 22% wanted to visit a male striptease (compared with 42% who wanted to visit a lady boy show or 36% who wanted to visit a go-go bar with female dancers). Only two of the women interviewed had been to a boy show, and the same two women were the only two who expressed an overt interest in visiting sexualized shows with male sex workers. Visiting a strip club or venue with male sex workers would mean that the boundaries that set out and delimit their experiences with the sex industry would shift, and they would have to work harder to deny the sexual nature of the visit. As it stands, many of the western women in the study use the sexual scripts available to them that privilege heterosexuality as normative and highlight femininity as passive or asexual (Simon and Gagnon, 1999; Frith and Kitzinger, 2001; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004) to deny any sexual element to the shows, or to their engagement with the sexual Others they come into contact with.

This extended portion of an interview with Andrea shows the complexity of women participants' understandings of these spaces. Here Andrea is talking about a memorable evening at a ping pong show in Patpong, where she accompanied five of her male friends and another Thai woman (not a sex worker) to the show:

**Andrea:** We all went to Patpong one night- and it was all guys, me and this Thai girl- and we went to one of the proper shows, you know, pussy doing smoking, pussy doing bottle of beer, and you know this that and the other, and there were these 5 very, very beautiful young girls on stage- just wearing little g-strings and white playboy bunny ears- and they did the show- the pole dancing and this that and the other and they kept looking over in our direction and as soon as the show had finished-they came off stage, they all made a beeline for me.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Andrea:** And one of them sat- I mean I had one of them on this thigh and the other on that thigh- and they were all playing with my hair, and chatting to me and stroking my skin-one of them took off her bunny ears and put them on me, and they were just all over me! And the boys were just staring at me- I mean they were almost completely naked, they were wearing just g-strings and they wanted to know all about me- I mean they just loved me. Thai girls always did partly because of the hair and you know...and the guys' jaws hit the floor- and they were going -'is there something we didn't know about you?' - and I was just covered in five naked dancers- that was um, very memorable.

Andrea's experience of this space, something she went to see with her male friends, was 'memorable' because of her interaction with the sex workers. She tells the story here, highlighting the way these beautiful, naked Thai sex workers were all over her, touching her and sitting on her lap. However, when I ask her about the sexual aspect of the interaction, she is quick to dismiss this:

**Interviewer:** Did they fancy you, or?

**Andrea:** No, no, they, Thai girls generally, not just in the clubs or whatever- I mean they always, I just, the girls were-I mean mostly in Patpong the visitors are white western males and usually they have a Thai prostitute with them, I mean yes there are women who go and quite often tourists will go because it's a bit of an experience- but it's certainly much more unusual to get a white girl, plus a blond girl, um you know- they just- it wasn't a sexual thing at all, I think they were just excited to see someone like me there! But um, yeah they were all over me like a rash.

**Interviewer:** How did you feel about them being...

**Andrea:** I thought it was hilarious, absolutely hilarious!

Andrea makes the point to distinguish both herself and the men she was there with (and other tourists who might go for the experience) from the problematic white western males. Despite visiting the show with five western male friends, she makes a reference to the difference between 'them' and her group of tourists. She points out that her interaction with these sex workers was not 'a sexual thing at all', but was rather entertaining and 'hilarious'. The Thai sex workers were engaged in what would normally be a sexual performance and, had they initiated the same contact with a western man, would have most certainly been constituted as sexual. However, Andrea is able to deny the sexual nature of this engagement because she is firmly convinced of her own (hetero)sexuality, (and the heterosexuality of the sex workers) and as such her sexual interest in the Other (and conversely, their interest in her) is not in question here.

Mandy and Laura, a lesbian couple on holiday together, were not able to access this sexual script, and worked in different ways to avoid constructing their experience in the ping pong shows as sexual. Despite the fact that they visited the shows repeatedly over their two week trip, when I ask Mandy and Laura if they have ever been 'hit on' by Thai women, Mandy replies:

**Mandy:** Yes, quite a few times. Ha ha! Definitely.

**Interviewer:** How do you feel about that?

**Mandy:** I'm ready to run a mile. I go and try to bury my head in the sand.

**Interviewer:** Does it make you uncomfortable?

**Mandy:** Yes, it does actually. Yes. It's funny at the time but when it starts and it's like this....no. I start to panic....I just don't like it. I don't know. It's funny to explain. I just don't like it...

Mandy's engagement with this space, as a lesbian women, makes it much harder to use a coded heterosexual script to deny a sexual element. Her reaction is confusing, especially as

she tells me she has been to see the shows almost every night of her trip. Like many of the women who participated in the research, she somehow denies any sexual element to her encounters. However, the way she describes this, ‘running a mile’ or ignoring the sexual contact she encounters, her feeling of being ‘uncomfortable’ and not able to explain this ‘panic’ she feels when confronted with Thai sex workers (who might likely be interested in her as a customer) is a much more vehement disavowal than the some of the other western women have put forward. Were she to categorize her behavior as sexual, she would perhaps have to explore her position in relation to the ‘sex tourists’ who also inhabit these spaces.

Indeed, male tourists are not able to use their sexual scripts to redeem their behavior, and those who do not adhere to the tourist script available to them are in danger of being understood as sex tourists. Indeed, western men who crossed these lines and engaged with more sexual aspects of these spaces were seen as disgusting, as 70% of women said they’d be disgusted if their male friends went to a prostitute.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>I’d be disgusted if any of my male friends went to a prostitute</b> (n=130)	(n=53) 41%	(n=38) 29%	(n=9) 7%	(n=26) 20%	(n=4) 3%

The survey data shows that my respondents felt prostitute use amongst western men was problematic, with 81% agreeing that western men who buy sex in Thailand exploit women.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Western men who buy sex in Thailand are exploiting women.</b> (n=129)	(n=65) 50%	(n=40) 31%	(n=12) 9%	(n=11) 9%	(n=1) 1%

When I ask Ella and Vicky, two young Scottish women, what they think about the male sex tourists in Thailand, they say:

**Ella:** Perverts.

**Vicky:** Desperate.

Callie suggested that men who actually pay for sex command less respect:

**Callie:** I don't know what I'd say to someone here if I knew that they were paying for sex. I would be like, 'Ok, my respect for you has just gone way down.'

Western men who deviate from the proscribed tourist path, which allows for engaging with the sex industry as part of a group for purely visual reasons, are seen as disgusting or less worthy of commanding respect.

In general, many women who completed the survey felt that men in Thailand bought sex because they were too old and ugly to get women in their home countries:

	Yes	No
<b>Tourist men who use prostitutes here: Are too old and ugly to get women back home<sup>30</sup>(n=130)</b>	(n=88) 68%	(n=42) 32%

In Pattaya Amanda (an English women in her late forties) suggests that she likes to 'people watch' as part of her holiday experience, and in particular enjoys looking on at the 'pathetic' male sex tourists on Walking Street with their young Thai companions. She describes the male sex tourists in Pattaya as 'fat', 'disgusting', 'sad', 'old', and 'ugly':

**Amanda:** Some of them are so ugly- you know they could never get a girlfriend in England so they come here instead. My plane was full of men. I think there was me and maybe three other women, the rest were men.

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<sup>30</sup> This survey question was based on data gathered from initial interviews with women, who frequently used the terms 'old' and 'ugly' to refer to male sex tourists, and suggested they came to Thailand because they were unable to get women at home. The survey question reflects this assumption and asks women to what extent they might agree with this.

When taking in the sites/sights of Walking Street, Amanda does not just notice the sex workers, she notices the fat, old men she assumes to be sex tourists. Because Amanda is a woman, she assumes her heterosexual position in these spaces/places is beyond question, and her adherence to her (hetero)sexual script defines her involvement as asexual.

While many women are interested in going to see the sex industry, as part of their tourist experience, the result is that the bodies of both Thai sex workers and male tourists come under scrutiny. The bodies of Thai sex workers and western male tourists both become the object of the tourist gaze in the sex tourism setting.

**The Sexual Space of Thailand: Problematizing Ambiguous Sexual Others**

While western men who engage in commercially sexual relationships were seen in a very negative light, at the same time their interactions were mitigated by the specific space of Thailand. Opinions were divided about whether it was ‘fine to buy sex as long as both parties are consenting adults’, with 42% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was and 48.9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that it was not. However, there was a strong feeling among women that buying sex was not something men did because they were more sexual.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>In this day and age, buying sex is fine as long as both parties are consenting adults</b> (n=129)	(n=8) 6%	(n=47) 36%	(n=10) 8%	(n=42) 33%	(n=22) 17%

<b>Men are more sexual than women so it's natural that they use prostitutes</b> N=130	(n=2) 2%	23 18%	4 3%	52 40%	49 37%
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When it came to understanding the behavior of western men who buy sex in Thailand, there was some confusion amongst participants as to whether this was a normal or fun activity, or if it was something more disturbed.

	Yes	No
<b>Tourist men who use prostitutes here: Are just enjoying themselves and having a good time</b> (n=130)	(n=56) 43%	(n=74) 57%
<b>Tourist men who use prostitutes here: Do what's normal for men who visit Thailand to do</b> (n=130)	(n=28) 22%	(n=102) 78%

43% of women agreed or strongly agreed that male tourists who use prostitutes, are just enjoying themselves and having a good time, and 22% agreed or strongly agreed that tourist men who use prostitutes here, do what's normal for men who visit Thailand to do. These ideas seem to contradict one another, as on the one hand normal men do not use prostitutes in Thailand, and yet on the other hand those that do are just enjoying themselves and having a good time.

This links into a wider interpretation of Thailand and Thai culture as more naturally sexual, with many women in the survey suggested that prostitution was normal in Thailand. Only 26% of women disagreed that prostitution is a normal part of Thai culture, and 53% agreed that Thai culture is more natural and open about sex.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Prostitution seems to be a normal part of Thai culture</b> (n=130)	(n=30) 23%	(n=55) 42%	(n=11) 8%	(n=25) 19%	(n=9) 7%

<b>Thai culture is more natural and open about sex than western culture</b> (n=130)	(n=22) 17%	(n=47) 36%	(n=20) 15%	(n=34) 26%	(n=7) 5%
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In this sense, having sex with prostitutes or visiting a ping pong show becomes less problematic if the people involved are more open and natural about sex, and if prostitution is a part of the culture.

For women that did know some of these ‘sex tourists’, there was a reluctance condemn men that they know or travel with. I spoke with Hella, a Dutch woman in her 60s, who was traveling with her gay friends in Pattaya. She expressed her reservations about prostitution and sex tourism in this space, but told me that she was out in Boyztown over several evenings with her friends, and said that her male friends: ‘often bring a boy back to the hotel, but I pretend not to see’. Her ability to look away from what’s happening, to not ‘see’ what her friends are doing allows her to disengage, to stand apart from this problem and in this way she does not have to condemn or even think about the behaviors of her friends. The importance of *looking* and *seeing* here will be revisited in more depth in Chapter Six.

Both Vicky and Ella who had described male sex tourists as ‘perverted’ and ‘desperate’, later gave a more nuanced interpretation of these men:

**Interviewer:** What about the western men who come over here? Should we be teaching them anything? Do you think that there is any way to stop them coming over?

**Vicky:** No. So long as they can do it, they will. They can’t get a break back home. A lot of them have just got out of divorces and they come over here and it’s a great life for them. Their mates all do the same thing in the pubs. They’ve all got the brides. When they don’t want to talk to them they put them all down on the same table and get them to talk to each other. They don’t speak; they do what they’re told.

Despite suggesting earlier that these sex tourists were disgusting, Vicky here presents her understanding of male tourists' behaviors in relation to the Thai sex workers who are also part of this equation. Thai women here are passive, mute beings who 'do what they're told' and this racist stereotype of Asian women as submissive and servile enters into the discourse around prostitution and the sex industry. While western men are gross and pathetic, there is also a condemnation of Thai women and their refusal to speak up for themselves woven into this narrative.

Vicky also suggests that Thai sex workers have less freedom than sex workers at home might:

**Vicky:** I don't really know much about it but I think that prostitutes at home have a lot more freedom. I imagine here that they have certain places they can go and people who are in charge of them....

While both Vicky and Ella initially suggest that male sex tourists were the problem, we can also see how discourses on Thai women as passive/submissive victims creep into their narratives, and becomes part and parcel of their understanding of the sexual scene in Thailand.

The male sex tourists on the scene, understood on one hand as disgusting and pathetic, are understood slightly differently when women consider the nature of Thai femininity. Anna notes:

**Anna:** These men can't find a woman at home so they try somewhere different. I saw a documentary about men hunting women really for marrying, to find a wife. It's really funny to see. They don't like strong women but women who agree and serve.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Thai women are more like that?

**Anna:** I don't know that much about Thai women. They are friendly and helpful but I don't know about in a marriage. I don't know if they do it also with Thai men. On the television these men like women who serve but I don't know if that's also here.

While Anna is not quite sure what Thai women are actually like, her understanding of the discourse surrounding Asian women as submissive/passive suggests that these readings of Thai women are widespread and, for many women, contain an element of truth. Beth had a very personal experience with a western man who had been 'spoiled' by his engagement with Asian women. She says:

**Beth:** I think it's a bit tragic, really. You see these really old men coming out with these really beautiful women walking along the beach with them. It's a bit sad. I feel sorry for the women really. My dad spent two years out here. He was working and when he came back he was the biggest chauvinistic pig ever. He expected us to do everything for him. That's what the Thai women do for them so I think he just got into the mindset that he would come back and it would be the same but it just isn't like that in England.

While Beth feels sorry for female sex workers, as they have to deal with the sad, old western men, she also implicitly suggests that Thai women somehow encourage a problematic mindset in that they facilitate chauvinistic behavior. She implies that Thai sex workers 'do everything' for the western men they encounter, and this has a negative consequence should they return to the west: 'it just isn't like that in England' suggests that, in Thailand, western men act in a way that they would not be able to carry off in England and by being submissive Thai women encourage this type of behavior.

There was some suggestion from survey participants that western men might engage in prostitute use because of the submissive nature of Thai women, in this sense absolving men's behavior.

	Yes	No
<b>Tourist men who use prostitutes in Thailand 'like Thai women because they are more submissive than western women'</b> (n=130)	(n=75) 58%	(n=55) 42%

The understanding of sex workers and Thai women more generally, as submissive or subjugated, was developed in contrast to women's own understandings of themselves. Of the 131 tourist women surveyed, most women indicated in one way or another that sex workers were somehow different to themselves, with 66% of western women seeing themselves as more independent, and 68% saying that seeing the lives of Thai women made them feel lucky to be from a western country:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Western women are more independent than Thai women</b> (n=129)	(n=31) 24%	(n=53) 42%	(n=21) 16%	(n=21) 16%	(n=3) 2%
<b>Seeing how Thai women live makes me feel lucky to be a western woman</b> (n=130)	(n=41) 32%	(n=46) 35%	(n=8) 6%	(n=29) 22%	(n=6) 5%

Women's understandings of Thai women as passive partly stems from their national/feminine identity- these solo traveling women have a wealth of capital to draw on (economic, political, social) that enables them to travel independently. Western women are generally exercising various types of power to be in Thailand, and they seem somehow to recognize this power and compare this to Thai sex workers who they acknowledge as being in a poor/unfortunate state.

In general, western women expressed sympathy for the women working in the sex industry, but expressed this in relation to their own position. In particular, 80% felt ‘sorry’ for the female sex workers working in prostitution:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>I feel sorry for Thai women working in prostitution</b> (n=129)	(n=52) 40%	(n=52) 40%	(n=5) 4%	(n=16) 12%	(n=4) 4%

Alison spoke to me about her experiences in Phuket. She talks in great detail about wanting to rescue the sex workers she comes across. Here a rescue fantasy is described:

**Alison:** I wish I had enough money to free them all from their, you know, their bondage- it seems to me like they’re slaves to the industry because of the money and their poverty.

Alison feels sorry for the girls she has seen in bars and clubs, yet despite being upset about the situation goes back to the same spaces/places every evening. Thai women are seen as poor victims that need to be rescued, yet despite this (or perhaps because of this) they also hold a fascination that keeps her visually engaged with the sex industry. She suggests that their abject state is related to their impoverished condition; poverty here is the cause of their bondage:

**Alison:** I can understand where they come from with the poverty and all that, from a woman who’s been looked after all her life it made me feel sad that I couldn’t free them.

This rescue fantasy was something that other women related to as over half of the respondents suggested that Thai sex workers were in need of rescue:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>‘Women working in the sex industry need to be rescued (n=130)</b>	(n=24) 18%	(n=46) 35%	(n=26) 21%	(n=27) 21%	(n=7) 5%

Understanding this positioning of sex workers as victims is perhaps part of more recent understandings of sex work in developing countries and the link to HIV/AIDS that is highlighted in guidebooks and in some popular cultural material. This was something that Andrea highlighted. When I asked her if she felt sorry for Thai women, and if she saw Thai sex workers as victims, she seemed to agree:

**Interviewer:** Did you feel sorry for the girls working in the sex industry?

**Andrea:** Yeah, I mean most of them have come down from the provinces, I think that in '96- I think it was then rather than one of my earlier trips, the statistic was that 45% of them had HIV- and that was then. Um, and you know coming down from the provinces to earn money for your family back home and being sentenced to death- I mean- I don't know because I never um- there are prostitutes who offered their services to me-but I've never gone down that route- so I don't imagine they enjoy it.

Andrea suggests that the sex workers have to earn money for their families, and highlights the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, which she suggests is a death sentence for many of these women. In this sense, perhaps some of the participants understand the scripts that govern sex work in the developing world in such a way that they feel they should feel sorry for sex workers, forced into sex work and likely to die of AIDS.

As the interview with Andrea continues, a more ambivalent position becomes clear:

**Interviewer:** Lots of women that I've spoken to have used the word victim when they've spoken about women in the sex industry- is that a word that you think is applicable?

**Andrea:** I mean, you can't really make generalizations, but yes, yeah. I mean some people are actually sent by their families because they're so desperate for money- um, I mean at the same time they use- the story about the girl who- they'll get um a foreign guy who keeps them and sends them money- but um, you so they use that to their advantage but- it's all a bit sad really.

For Andrea sex workers are victims, but also potential exploiters. She suggests that they come to the red light districts, driven by poverty and will probably die of AIDS- but at the same time- she makes clear that they are also using foreign men to the best of their ability. This agency seemingly contradicts the victimization rhetoric. Andrea tells a story about her aunt's interactions with a sex worker in Patpong. Her aunt had worked with EMPOWER, a NGO that works to empower and positively help sex workers, and Andrea's understanding of the complex nature of the sex industry seemed in some part based on the information she had received from her aunt. Andrea's interpretation of this is worth noting at length:

**Andrea:** ...she said your typical girl will have a German benefactor- usually a guy, a German guy who spends about 4 months in Thailand and the rest of the time in Germany- but in the meantime he'll send the girl money to stop her ostensibly from sleeping with other guys- to support her basically, but then the girls would send the money out to their family in the provinces and carry on working. And um, my aunt has been asked to help make up some really tall stories- like one girl came to her and said 'please can you help me write a letter to my boyfriend in Germany' and basically the story was she was writing to him to say that she'd been getting out of a cab the week before, and somebody had smashed her in the face with a bottle and she had to have treatment and all the money he'd sent her - she'd spent all the money on

treatment and the rest had gone to her family and could he please send her 45000 baht. My aunt's looking at this girl- not a scratch on her. And she's thinking- do I or don't translate this into English- and she thinks fuck it- of course I will. These sleazy German guys- you will find that the girls will come on to the women as well, on one way or another- lots of them are on the make- they just see you as a cash cow.

The way that Thai women are constructed in this part of the interview sits in contrast to the helpless victims Andrea referred to minutes earlier. Here Thai sex workers are 'on the make', seeing tourists (both male and female) as 'cash cows', able to make up elaborate lies in order to get more money out their foreign benefactors. In the narrative, Andrea seems to suggest that Thai women work to 'send money out to their family in the provinces' and also suggests that because the lie is being told to a 'sleazy German guy' then it becomes somehow acceptable. Thai sex workers, in this single story, are cast in a variety of different roles- as worthy daughters, lying lovers, and hapless victims.

There is an ambiguity evident in the way many participants understood the situation of women working in the sex industry. Thai sex workers were simultaneously cast as victims, as passive servants, and also as sexual aggressors by many of my interviewees and survey respondents.

Alison's grasp of the Thai sex workers' situation is understood in relation to her own (privileged) position. The recognition that these girls have nothing and are subjected to enslavement through their impoverished state sits in contrast to Alison's life as a 'looked after', (relatively) wealthy woman. Her earlier suggestion that she could 'free' them again acknowledges the forced position of sex workers in Thailand in contrast to the independence and freedom allotted to western women. However, Alison also understands sex workers are active solicitors and aggressive temptresses, as she describes being:

**Alison:** ...shell shocked at what was going on in Patong- the amount of sex out there on the street- girls going up to married couples trying to get the guys into the bars, and I suppose if I was here with my husband I might have been a bit more off put by that, having him being solicited to all the time, I'd maybe a bit more guarded like 'hands off' whereas here on my own I just kind of take in and go 'wow!'.

Interestingly, Alison's status as a solo traveler actually facilitated her entry into sexual spaces, as she would have been more reluctant to bring her husband into an area where he might be solicited by the sex workers she was talking about rescuing moments earlier.

Gemma was equally ambivalent about the position of sex workers. On the one hand she tells me she feels sorry for women working in the sex industry, yet on the other she suggests that:

**Gemma:** ...here you can rent a woman for the two weeks so she is everywhere with you and I saw a lot of couples where you could see that she gets everything. I mean, she gets the holiday too. It is still not OK but sometimes we have the feeling about the women that they know what they can get for doing it. That's really the other point – so sometimes for them it's maybe a good deal.

For Gemma, we can see how the understanding of Thai women is linked into her understanding of their financial position, in that even though a woman might be 'rented' for two weeks, she still 'gets everything'. So while it is not 'ok', Gemma is quick to point out that this is a financial transaction, where Thai women are rented in the same way that other tourist services might be rented. However, it might be a 'good deal' for them, especially as they 'know what they get for doing it'.

Cathy described her experience of a ping pong show in Patpong as 'unpleasant' for a number of reasons. Cathy was one of the few interview participants who had been to a ping pong

show with her boyfriend, and was one of the only women I spoke to who expressed being genuinely upset by her experiences. She noted:

**Cathy:** I found it quite sad to be honest, um and yeah, I was quite annoyed with them [her boyfriend and his mate] for making me go up there, and also I felt quite sorry for the women as well.

**Interviewer:** Why did you feel sorry for them?

**Cathy:** Well I didn't think they were, they didn't seem, I don't know, but it didn't appear to be- they had any kind of element of choice about their choice of career, you know, in inverted commas, however you want to put it, their choice of position- I don't- I mean obviously I haven't done any research into it or anything but I got the impression that they'd probably been coerced into it against their will. I mean, I don't know how much money they would have received as well...

**Interviewer:** What made you think that? Was it the way they acted or the way they looked? I'm just wondering what was it that made you think that?

**Cathy:** I think it was partly the way the men who were running these places, because they were trying to get money out of you and partly because they looked actually quite bored, they had quite bored expressions on their face as well...

Cathy was adamant throughout the interview that Thai women were victims of the sex industry, but here she struggles to put into words exactly why she feels the women were being exploited. She suggests they did not seem to have a choice but does not really find any way to substantiate this: the bored expressions on their faces is her only evidence of coercion. Despite Cathy's inability to pinpoint how exactly Thai women are being exploited here, she is confident that they are victims. However, when I asked her about interactions with the sex industry in other areas in Thailand, her tone was somewhat different:

**Interviewer:** And have you seen any other prostitution in Thailand?

**Cathy:** Oh yeah, loads, I mean loads and loads, um women hanging out of bars, I'd find that if me and my partner were walking down the street you'd have women grabbing onto him saying 'come in sexy sir we love you long time' and all this kind of thing, I think it was quite blatant... We went to a couple of the islands, Koh Samui and Kho Pangnan, and I don't remember seeing much of it there particularly. I mean I did see women hanging out of bars and trying to get men into the bars, so it did seem like it was a kinda of overt sexual service but not in the same in your face kinda way....

Thai women here are not the victims of the sex industry but rather aggressive and sexual, grabbing at and trying to seduce people's partners. Cathy's ambivalence comes out very well when we consider her responses to questions about the ping pong show:

**Interviewer:** And how did you feel watching it [the ping pong show]?

**Cathy:** Um, like I shouldn't really have been there- like it wasn't really aimed at me and it was all quite nasty and quite horrible and 'why did I let people pull me into this?'; questions like that, I wouldn't say it was very enjoyable it was more sort of like, 'oh my god, this is actually quite horrible, why am I here?'.

**Interviewer:** So you think it was aimed at men then?

**Cathy:** Oh, definitely yeah, completely, it was kind of like 'look at all these fantastic limbering women that can do all these things that your girlfriend can't do in bed', that kind of stuff

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Cathy:** And one of them did make a comment like, 'well, wouldn't you like to be able to do things like that?' and I was like 'well, no'.

So the show was horrible for Cathy- and we can see her discomfort at looking at the 'limbering' Thai women who could do things in bed she could not do. The fact she was at the

show with her boyfriend perhaps made this even more disconcerting, but her response to the sex worker's comment seems to suggest a fear of being construed as sexual or sexually invested in this performance.

Many of the women interviewed seemed to feel they must reinforce a boundary between themselves and the sexual others they come into contact with, as 'the boundaries of the lascivious, dangerous and contagious... are no longer absolutely clear...for while black and white middle-class women become sites for the display of overt and excessive heterosexuality... white and black working class women remain sexual objects; cleaved by respectability' (Skeggs, 2005:969). Women must mark themselves out as different, as 'better' or more respectable, in relation to these Thai Others. Respectability is coded as a particular type of femininity that must be constantly policed (Lawler, 2005), or one risks losing one's social/class position.

### **Classed Identities and Sexual Subjectivities**

Skeggs (2005) suggests that modern subjectivities are constructed around the ability to present oneself as an 'ethical self'. In this sense, one's selfhood must be presented as socially responsible and must also display a disposition to moral worth, yet not everyone has equal access to cultural capital that allows for the presentation of an ethical self. Lawler notes:

It is only when cultural capital is sufficiently legitimated that [cultural capital] can be converted into symbolic capital – the prestige or recognition which various capitals acquire by virtue of being recognized and 'known' as legitimate. For Bourdieu, it is only the cultural capital of the middle classes which is legitimated in this way; their tastes, knowledges and dispositions are coded as *inherently* 'tasteful', inherently knowledgeable, *inherently* 'right'...Not to possess symbolic capital is to 'fail' in the games (Lawler, 2008:128, original emphasis)

Because sex workers lack the requisite capital to present themselves as ethical selves, it shows their baseness, their displays of sexuality ‘devalue, visually calibrating the failures of self-responsibility. They provide a spectacle of subjectivity turned sour, an epidemic of the will, their own responsibility for making bad choices’ (Skeggs, 2005: 974). There is an inconsistency on the part of western women, who on the one hand understand the lack of choices that sex workers have in some situations and the sad reality that many of them face. However, sex workers lack of the requisite capital required to be ‘ethical selves’ also means that they are somehow responsible for their own misery.

The importance of class here is more important than it might seem, as Lawler (2005) suggests that class differences are ‘marked by disapproval or disdain, not for the “objective” markers of their position, but for (what are perceived to be) their identities’ (2005:437). The difference between different class groups is an ontological difference: ‘...class is not simply an “objective” position which one occupies, but becomes configured into “who we are”’ (Lawler, 2008:129). Western women, in a higher class position and in possession of greater levels of cultural capital (making them ‘ethical selves’) are able to pass judgment on the Thai Others they encounter, and by nature of their position, they are able to ‘make that judgment count’ (Lawler, 2008:131). The way Thai women are cast as either victims or whores works within a class framework that enables certain (higher) groups to pathologize Other groups, to render them objects of disgust; western women here are able to code an entire way of life as repellent (Lawler, 2008) Thai women become ‘exotic specimens marked by... repulsiveness’ (Lawler, 2008:135) and their (lack of) subjectivity is enmeshed with this projection made by these western women tourists who visually consume them. Their identity as either/or ultimately renders them as ‘not me’, as Other.

Understanding women’s interactions with the sexual Others they encounter in these touristic spaces is built partly upon their classed tourist identity, but also related to their gendered

identity as well. In their article on feminine subjectivities, Bryant and Schofield (2007) explore the ways in which women's sexuality is derived, drawing on life history interviews with women in Australia. Female sexuality is presented by the female participants as dichotomous, where they engage and identify with a:

'Madonna/whore' discourse....[which] positions feminine sexuality dichotomously as good or bad. The former is associated with sexual passivity and responsiveness to masculine desire, while the latter involves women's initiation and/or active participation in sexual relations, particularly outside of marriage...One of [this discourse's] prominent features is its fundamentalist understanding of women's sexuality as being inherently depraved and dangerous, and in need of masculine control in order to protect social morality' (2007: 324).

As the authors note, this dichotomous structuring of sexualities means that there is a limited repertoire of practices that can be considered socially acceptable for many women. Some of the women in this study seemed to recognize the importance of these structures, but their embodied practices of sexuality are often more nuanced than they suggest, and their performance of sexuality defies the bounded discourse offered here. However, their subscription to and maintenance of the Madonna/whore discourse means that they reflectively consider their own behavior within this controlled script, and I suggest that the women in this study also replicate these dichotomous discourses as well.

Women's sexuality is influenced by the discourses of sexuality that predominate in western culture, but their sexual identity comes into play through their sexual practices; the role of 'sexual scripts' is important in everyday social/sexual practices (Padgug, 1999; Bryant and Schofield, 2007). We can see that these scripts also come into play in touristic practices as well, as the normative sexual roles afforded to men and women in particular cultural/social settings seems to have some impacts upon the type of sexual/gendered practices they engage

in, and more than that impacts the ways they interpret their own engagement with these spaces.

In an interview with Gemma, she suggests that she does not think she would find ping pong shows sexy because of her feminine position:

**Gemma:** The thing is that really often what women find sexy and what men find sexy is so different. I mean, most women don't like to watch hard porn because they don't find it sexy. They are just like, 'What's that?' But men do somehow find it sexy.

Gemma, who suggested to me that she'd like to see a show for 'interest', is able to aver her disinterest in the sexual nature of the shows because she understands the visual interaction of men in this space as qualitatively different to what women might be experiencing. Men's desire and women's desire here is contextualized in line with their sexual scripts, and according to Gemma, women's desires would not be activated by the activities that men might see as sexual. However, that does not stop her being interested in seeing these shows, and going to visit what she would understand as a sexualized space (even if she herself would not find it arousing). So while she recognizes the script available to her and acknowledges this, the fact that she wants to visit a sexualized venue at all suggests perhaps that embodied practices of sexuality are more nuanced than women might imagine.

It seems possible that women may want to enact some kind of masculine position by watching female sex workers at these venues. However, the data suggests that women who had been to the ping pong shows were not going in order to access a masculinized space. Of the 29 women in the survey who had been to a ping pong show, 24% of women agreed that: 'I liked being in a place where normally only men can go'.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>I liked being in a place where only men can go</b> (n=29)	(n=1) 3%	(n=6) 21%	(n=2) 6%	(n=14) 48%	(n=6) 21%

Every society constructs some sort of bounds and limits for members of that culture, and gendered behaviors are part of these normative constraints: ‘...while every society does divide its members into “men” and “women”, what is meant by these divisions and the roles played by those defined by these terms varies significantly from society to society’ (Padgug, 1999:22). Moreover, elements of class, race, and sexuality do not exist independently from one another, but rather ‘...produce and reproduce each other’s realities in complex ways’ (Padgug, 1999:23).

In this sense, understanding Thailand as a sexual destination shapes some of these women’s entrée into the sex industry, although the sexual scripts that are available to them are those that they have gathered from their experience in a western context. Their positioning of the sex industry as risky or exciting suggests that their engagement with the sex industry is not part of their normal repertoire. However, this means that the processes they normally adhere to in a western context are disrupted, and as such their sexual identity must be reevaluated in line with this shift. As Simon and Gagnon (1999) suggest, changes here in status and context necessitate a renegotiation of the self. Some of these western women see their own sexual encounter with the sex industry as asexual, in relation to the sexual Others they encounter: their visual interaction becomes asexual in relation to the western male sex tourists, and their own feminine identity is contrasted in relation to western men and the Thai women who they understand in relation to the sexual discourses normally available to any and every women. Like the women in Bryant and Schofield’s (2007) study, western women buy into the Madonna/whore discourse to some extent, often situating the Thai sex workers they encounter into this constraining paradigm.

Feona Attwood (2006) writes about the problems associated with studying sex. One of the most difficult problems, she argues, is definitional: 'When we say sex, what *do* we mean?' (2006: 79 original emphasis). This is an important question for this chapter, and in some way relates to the complex and changing responses of these women to the sex workers and sexual shows they consume. Some would argue that sexual discourses in the modern world are shifting and moveable, with attitudes towards sex becoming more lenient, obscene material becoming more prevalent, and sexual activities increasingly linked to the consumer marketplace (McNair, 2002; Attwood, 2006). Sexuality becomes linked into identity politics, and sexual practices are a way of mobilizing discourses on selfhood: '...sex signifies both the truth of the self *and* its performance; authenticity and artifice.

There are clear links here between sexual identities, and classed identities. The contemporary prominence of this formulation of sexuality as identity, hedonism and spectacle derives from the cultural prominence of a particular class grouping' (Attwood, 2006: 84). Coming back to the importance of class in this equation is important here, and questions of taste and capital are relevant in our understanding of modern day western femininity and sexuality.

...the sexually liberated female consumer is imagined and addressed by contemporary media depends on signs of class and race. Available constructions of a female sexuality in which activity and power are expressed in terms of 'low' characteristics- for example, in pornography and other forms of obscene or bawdy culture- are firmly eschewed here. Indeed, the bourgeois sexuality of this mainstream female figure appears to derive quite precisely from the rejection of the low class characteristic expressed most coherently in the production of a 'white trash' figure of the 'slut' elsewhere in the culture. The 'classiness' of female sexual activity is extremely important here both as a way of establishing its legitimacy and of linking sexuality to a range of other contemporary bourgeois concerns such as the

development and display of style and taste and the pursuit of self-improvement and self-care(2006: 85).

Talking about 'working-class' people, Lawler argues that they are positioned as Other to the middle classes, and the middle classes are 'silently marked as normal and desirable. But - and more fundamentally...they also work to produce middle-classed identities that rely on *not* being the repellent and disgusting "other"' (2005: 431). This understanding of class identity is predicated upon the relational notion of self/Other. 'As the other, they are assumed to be knowable and their subjectivities are assumed to be knowable through their appearance' (2005:442).

Walkowitz suggests that for 'respectable' women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century London, shopping and philanthropy were often seen as 'roughly equivalent recreational activities appropriate to their station...Both pursuits established [a woman's] right to look, to assume a mask of anonymity without relinquishing the privileges of class' (1992: 53). Walkowitz highlights several women who went 'slumming' as a means of diversion and a way to add adventure to their middle-class lives. These women could see without being seen: 'they could enjoy the spectacle of characters' (1992: 57) and they enjoyed this privileged freedom because of their class position. To some extent women are still participating in these types of behaviors, with relatively wealthy western women 'slumming' in the sex industry of Thailand as a contemporary form of diversion, and a way to add excitement to their travel experiences. The specific place of Thailand and their roles as desexualized tourists enables this form of recreational pursuit, without them having to relinquish their class privilege.

Some of these female participants, guided by western sexual scripts that work to deny women's active sexuality, are able to understand their visual consumption of the sex industry in Thailand as 'normal' and to some extent 'cultural', meaning that they are able to hold on to their status as a knowledgeable and cultured traveler, while at the same time maintaining their

interactions with these spaces are a/unsexual. As such they are able to render this engagement with an encounter that has a ‘high density of external sexual cues’ as not sexual at all- *at least not sexual for them themselves*. They recognize that the situation is sexual because they understand that male sex tourists go to the shows to be aroused, but they are able to deny any sexual intent, or any sexual pleasure on their own part.

Survey results suggested many participants adopted a particular type of feminine identity in Thailand, with 81% of women said they do not wear more revealing clothes in Thailand than at home (although a few women wrote on their survey that they wore more revealing clothes because of the hot weather). Only 11% said they felt sexier in Thailand than they might at home.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>‘I feel sexier here than I do at home’</b> (n=130)	(n=2) 2%	(n=12) 9%	(n=4) 3%	(n=77) 59%	(n=35) 27%
<b>‘I wear more revealing/sexy clothes in Thailand than I do at home’</b> (n=130)	(n=2) 2%	(n=22) 17%	(n=0) 0%	(n=63) 48%	(n=43) 33%

The way western women operationalize femininity and the ways in which they position their sexual/feminine/touristic identity in contrast to the Other women they encounter reveals something about the nature of their engagement with these spaces and people. Notions of femininity are often based on ideas of respectability (Lawler, 2005) and women are operationalizing a particular form of feminine identity, a desexualized identity, as well as a particular *class* identity.

**Women’s Experiences of the Sex Industry as Passive**

As we have seen in this chapter, many women ignored the role of the sexual in their consumption of the sex industry. Women who had visually consumed some form of erotic entertainment were particularly keen to show that their engagement was not sexual. However, there was an acknowledgement in the survey that going to see a ping pong show was linked in some way to sexual consumption. Some women recognized the visual role of the sex industry, and its relationship to pornography. 57% of women surveyed agreed that going to a ping pong show would be like a similar experience to looking at pornography:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Going to see a ping pong show is just like looking at pornography</b> (n=129)	(n=18) 14%	(n=56) 43%	(n=25) 19%	(n=27) 21%	(n=3) 2%

However, women made a clear distinction between interpreting this engagement as EITHER looking OR acting. When asked if going to a ping pong show was just like paying for sex with a prostitute, 60% of women said it was not.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Going to see a ping pong show is just like paying for sex with a prostitute</b> (n=129)	(n=10) 8%	(n=15) 12%	(n=27) 21%	(n=64) 50%	(n=13) 10%

For many women, the line that divides active participation with the sex industry is drawn at the line of vision. Looking or visually consuming the sex industry may be like pornography, but this visual consumption is qualitatively different to paying for sex with a sex worker.

Some women admitted to being ‘fascinated’ by the bodies of sex workers, which again highlights the visual nature of the interaction, and also suggests that the bodies of Thai women become the object of the fascinated tourist gaze. Of the women who had been to see a ping pong show, 87% women agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: ‘I found it fascinating to see what their bodies were capable of’.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>I found it fascinating to see what their bodies were capable of (n=29)</b>	(n=3) 10%	(n=22) 77%	(n=1) 3%	(n=3) 10%	(n=0) 0%

Callie, in her interview in Chiang Mai, highlights her interpretation of what she thinks a ping pong show would be like:

**Interviewer:** What do you think it [a ping pong show] would be like?

**Callie:** Good question. I suppose it would be like a light hearted live version of porn if that makes sense. I think it would be more like light hearted than porn. Porn is a bit kind of hard core, striving through to get somewhere. This would be more like fun.

Ping pong shows, in this sense, would be more fun than porn, because they are not ‘striving’ to get somewhere, but rather the pleasure comes in looking for the sake of looking. The western women who participated in this study were able to visually consume this ‘lighthearted’ entertainment precisely because they are able to remove themselves from the situation, and desexualize their experience, and furthermore they deproblematize their interactions with the sex industry. While talking to Andrea, who had been to numerous sexual shows over her several trips to Thailand, I asked her if she ever thought about her own involvement with the sex industry:

**Interviewer:** And did you feel weird going to the ping pong shows- like you were in some way contributing to the sex industry?

**Andrea:** I’m afraid I never thought of it that way actually- I mean the sex industry is there and it’s not going to go away- so my presence there isn’t going to make a great deal of difference.

Some of these women saw the sex industry as an immutable fact, something that existed outside of their engagement, and a phenomenon that they did not affect, nor could they change it. Callie highlights her view of the sex industry:

**Callie:** Yes, I think it's quite sick, really but there's not much you can do about it.

This understanding of the sex industry as something that exists already, as something that is 'already' there, suggests women see themselves as outside of the context, as irrelevant to the situation. They do not access the shows to be like western men, they access the shows as tourists and construct their experience as passive and unproblematic. Their interactions with the sex industry are predicated upon their understanding of this interaction as both asexual/unsexual, and passive.

The next chapter will argue that a closer examination of 'looking' highlights a more complex relationship, and suggests that looking is not a passive activity, neither are women's looking relations asexual. An analysis of voyeurism will begin to deconstruct the experience of looking and watching, as it relates to sex and power in psychic processes.

### **Conclusions**

As we have seen in this chapter, the positioning of the Other, and particular the positioning of Thai sex workers in the minds of western women is not static, but rather shifts between understanding Thai women as passive/submissive/victims to seeing them as aggressively sexual. However, by relegating them to either victim or whore, Thai women are divested of their subjectivity: in a sense Thai sex workers becomes objects, and more than that they are often seen as essentialized exotic, erotic Others.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) arguments about 'live displays' created for touristic consumption suggest that 'live exhibits tend to make people into artifacts because the ethnographic gaze objectifies....semiotically, live displays make the status of the performer problematic, for people become signs of themselves' (1998: 415). Thai women become signs of themselves but, more than that, they are often seen as deviant Others that serve to reinforce the power western women have in this context. Western women are in control when they wander through the streets of Patpong, they are in control when they watch a ping pong show, and they are in control when they talk about Thai women as victims or agents of their sexuality.

However, authors who have studied sex tourism have pointed to the importance of history and context in the phenomenon of sexual tourism (Enloe, 1989; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Brennan, 2004; Sanchez Taylor, 2006). In articles on sexual tourism in Cuba, Carter (2008) and Fusco (1998) both note that Cuban women are sexualized and commoditized for tourist consumption, in similar ways to Thai women. While this thesis has worked to demonstrate the necessity of situating tourist behaviors in the particular context of Thailand, there are larger issues that need to be considered here as well, issues that go beyond the context or history of one country. Local bodies in the Caribbean, in Southeast Asia, in Africa, in India, in South America become commodified objects of the tourist gaze, and are seen as tourism commodities. While the history and context of each of these regions contributes to the particular understanding of the Others who inhabit these 'exotic' spaces, the impulses that drive tourists to (visually) consume these eroticized and racialized Others must lie upon some other, connected foundation.

Chapters Four and Five have worked to show the ways that women understand the Thai sex industry by focusing on the words that they use to describe the sexual spaces and sexual Others who occupy tourists sites/sights in Thailand. Chapter Six will suggest that to understand the impulses that work to facilitate women's entrée into the sex industry, to

understand the desire that guides them to watching ping pong shows and visually exploring red light areas, we must look below the surface to what women are not saying. As Chapter Two suggested, many women had a difficult time articulating their thoughts and feelings on the sex industry, they could talk about other important tourist/gender issues, but when it came to talking about sex tourism or prostitution in Thailand, their answers were often confused or conflicting. Chapter Six will look at the gaps and the spaces, to what women *did not say*, to try to more fully understand women's interactions with the Thai sex industry. Using psychoanalysis as a framework, the next chapter posits that this desire to render object/abject Thai Others must also be linked into power structures that women may not be consciously aware of, but that exist nonetheless, and have important consequences for how we might better understand this engagement with tourist-oriented sexualized spaces.

## **Chapter 6: The Sadistic Turn: Women's Voyeuristic Engagement with the Sex Industry**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Four has argued that many of the participants' understandings of authenticity impacts upon their engagement with certain spaces in Thailand. They see the sex industry as a normal tourist site, and their desire to engage in particular activities impacts upon their formation of their own tourist identity. Chapter Five argued that many of these women's relationships with the Others they encounter in these sexual spaces is predicated upon their own understanding of themselves as passive observers and their identity as a tourist in these spaces helps shield them from interrogating their motivations to engage with and visually explore these arenas.

This chapter will explore two questions that relate to women's visual interactions with sexualized spaces. Firstly, are women's visual interactions with the sex industry really passive? Secondly, how does power operate in western women's visual consumption of the Other? To answer these research questions I will explore the visual consumption of the sex industry by the research participants, using psychoanalytic theory as a starting point. I have turned to psychoanalysis for two reasons. Firstly, psychoanalysis functions here as a means of exploring visual processes and as a way to understand how watching/looking relates to power. Secondly, psychoanalysis offers the tools needed to examine the things that are unsaid, to interrogate silences- psychoanalysis in this chapter will be used as a way to delve into some of these women's unspoken understandings of the sex industry.

Exploring the power relations that are wrapped up in looking/watching allows for a reconsideration of what female participants are doing when they look at the bodies of Thai Others. While tourism processes are based on bodily experiences, by and large these women talk about their engagement with the sex industry as part of a visual interaction, and work to separate the visual behavior of tourists in these spaces from the 'real' engagement of western

male sex tourists. These looking relations are problematic in that they render Thai Others the object and abject, and this chapter suggests that these looking relations are not as innocent or removed from the 'real' action as women might imagine. Western women's engagement with the sex industry in Thailand demonstrates a privileged status; they are able to access spaces normally reserved for men as their interaction with these spaces means they visually consume sexual entertainment in ways that would be more restricted at home (Hubbard et al, 2008). Many of the women who participated in the research visually consume the bodies of Other, Thai women, who are positioned as tourist object for both male and female tourists in these spaces. Women, in this sense, are enacting a 'gaze' that might normally be unavailable to them, and this chapter will explore the possibility of a 'female gaze'. Psychoanalytic interpretations of the intersection of vision and visual practices with gender, sexuality, and power offer a useful starting point for this chapter.

Psychoanalysis, as suggested, also offers a useful framework for considering the things that have gone unsaid or unspoken by the research participants. No matter how many times or in how many ways I asked women why they might want to see the sex industry, why they might be drawn towards visiting a ping pong show- their answers were often bare, inarticulate, uncritical. They relied on the normative position of the sex industry in Thailand to explain these desires. They were adamant that they were not sexually aroused by the shows; that their entrée into this normally masculine space was not about wanting to act like a man or accessing masculine spaces, but rather they suggested they were simply intrigued and wanted to 'see what all the fuss was about'. Critically, their interviews were full of contradictions- Thai women are both whores and victims, the shows are sexual in nature but not sexual for *them*, western male sex tourists are just having a good time but are also exploiting Other women. The spaces in the interviews all point at these contradictions, and it seems possible that these conflicting perspectives reveal more than just confusion. Perhaps the problem lies partly in the inability of these women to find the language or the words to convey their actual thoughts or feelings, but this inability to articulate their thoughts coherently on the sex

industry, on sex workers, on sex tourists - suggests a deeper silence and an important gap in women's interpretation of their own and other's engagements with these sexual spaces. The answers that these western women give fail to provide a full picture of what's happening here. Psychoanalysis allows for an exploration of these unconscious thoughts and desires, and enables an interpretation of women's activities in sexual spaces and with eroticized Others in Thailand that moves beyond their actual words and descriptions.

The next section will explore voyeurism as a way of determining women's desire to visually consume the sex industry, and the way that voyeurism sits within the Freudian spectrum of perverse behaviors. A critical examination of the ways that voyeurism and perversion have been understood as masculine perversions will be evidenced, and women's enactment of sadistic/voyeuristic behaviors while in Thailand will be provided.

### **Watching and Seeing: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Voyeurism**

'Voyeur' is literally translated from the French as 'one who sees'; the English derivation of voyeur is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a person whose sexual desires are stimulated or satisfied by covert observation of the sex organs or sexual activities of others' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009a) while Merriam-Webster's dictionary has a more expansive understanding of a voyeur:

1. one obtaining sexual gratification from observing unsuspecting individuals who are partly undressed, naked, or engaged in sexual acts ; *broadly*: one who habitually seeks sexual stimulation by visual means 2: a prying observer who is usually seeking the sordid or the scandalous (Merriam-Webster, 2009a)

Scopophilia is literally translated from the Latin as ‘love of looking’ and is defined by Merriam-Webster as ‘a desire to look at sexually stimulating scenes especially as a substitute for actual sexual participation’ (Merriam-Webster, 2009b) while the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that scopophilia is ‘sexual stimulation or satisfaction derived principally from looking; voyeurism’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009b). Voyeurism and scopophilia are often taken to mean the same thing and are sometimes used interchangeably. Both terms are rooted in psychoanalytic understandings of sexual behaviors (more specifically sexually ‘abnormal’ behaviors) and can be linked to Freudian understandings of perversion. Beginning with Freud’s hypotheses on perversions and neuroses allows for the evolution of these ideas to be traced; gendered analyses of psychoanalytic theory have emerged and shifted the original Freudian interpretations of both perverse behaviors and neurotic behaviors.

### **Freudian Understandings of Perversion and Voyeurism**

Freud suggested that sexual perversions are rooted in childhood trauma. In his 1909 lecture on the history of psychoanalysis he notes that: ‘The imperishable, repressed wishes of childhood have alone provided the power for the construction of symptoms and without them the reaction to the later traumas would have a different course’ (Freud, 1978: 41). Freud argued that, during infancy, our experiences of the world and objects in it shape the foundations of our adult minds. He maintains that the organization of sexual life occurs during two distinct phases: the first of the two waves beginning between the ages of two and five, and the second wave occurs with the onset of puberty (Freud, 1995:274). The infantile phase is critical for the development of our adult sexual nature. He argues that between the two phases the (sexual) experiences we have are repressed, and these repressed memories are critical in the development of the unconscious. Pajaczkowska notes that ‘The infantile experiences that constitute the first of the two diphasic developments become repressed and form the basis of the adult unconscious mind, of phantasy and of sublimations of instincts into cultural and social practices’ (Pajaczkowska, 2000:14). For Freud sexual instincts can be

understood as psychological urges, and the various 'libidinal' stages we enter as infants have an impact on our development into 'normal' adults. Prince argues that:

Along the way to such normality, some components of the sexual instinct must be suppressed or sublimated (e.g., the coprophilic elements), and there persists the danger that an individual's sexual development will become arrested, fixated at a stage along the way to full, normal development. The perversions, such as fetishism, represent such fixations (Prince, 1988, 28).

Perversion within psychoanalysis is understood as a sexual act, but not necessarily a genital act (Pajaczkowska, 2000) and these perversions, such as fetishism and voyeurism, are linked to sexual instincts that are suppressed during infantile development and can occur during one of the three stages of development: the oral stage, the anal stage, or the phallic stage. If urges in the phallic stage are repressed this may have a later significance for the development of perversions, and specifically voyeuristic tendencies.

A number of other important developments occur during the phallic stage that are linked to the Oedipus complex and impact on libidinal development. Freud suggests that during this phase sexual differences are discovered by little boys and little girls:

...the existence of two sexes does not begin to arouse any difficulties or doubts in children. It is self-evident to the male child that a genital like his own is to be attributed to everyone he knows, and he cannot make its absence tally with his picture of these other people. This conviction is energetically maintained by boys, is obstinately defended against the contradictions which soon result from observation, and is only abandoned after severe internal struggles (the castration complex)... The assumption that all human beings have the same (male) form or genital is the first of many remarkable and momentous sexual theories of children (Freud, 1995:271).

At the phallic stage a male child begins to recognize the sexual differences between himself and his mother. The child's observations eventually demonstrate that, contrary to his crucially held belief, his mother does not in fact have a penis. Christian Metz argues that, during the castration crisis, the female child fears that this mutilation has already been carried out while the male child fears that this mutilation/castration might be visited upon him: 'it is this very terror which is projected on to the spectacle of the mother's body and invites the reading of an absence where anatomy sees difference' (Metz, 1982: 69). The castration complex ensues after this realization takes hold and this crisis is of crucial importance in the development of normative sexual behaviors in later life.

During the phallic stage the Oedipus complex develops, which has an important impact on the development of 'normal' adult libidinal urges. The Oedipus complex is based on two desires: the first is a desire for the parent of the opposite sex, while the second is for the demise of the parent of the same sex. Welldon argues that for male children the desire to kill the parent of the same sex (the father) 'will then enable the boy to possess his mother. The child fears the father's retaliation for these murderous wishes; castration seems the unavoidable outcome' (Welldon, 1992:2). Freud suggests that to work through these anxieties about castration is to 'renounce the incestuous object, so the Oedipus complex comes to an end and the boy enters the latency period' (Welldon, 1992:2).

Freud clearly gives primacy to the penis, suggesting rather famously that little girls often suffer from 'penis envy': 'Little girls do not resort to a denial of this kind [meaning the castration complex] when they see that boys' genitals are formed differently than their own. They are ready to recognize them immediately and are overcome by envy for the penis- an envy culminating in the wish...to be boys themselves' (Freud, 1995: 271). Welldon notes that as a little girl enters the Oedipus complex: 'she changes not only her sexual object from mother to father, but also her wish for the penis her mother never gave her for a wish to have

a baby by her father. The symbolic equivalence of penis and baby was created' (Welldon, 1992:2). Whilst women might suffer from penis envy, they are not engulfed in the crisis of the castration complex to the same extent as boys, and are able to (somewhat) displace their desire for a penis with a desire for a baby; however it still remains that from a psychoanalytic perspective women are understood as lack, and never entirely get over their desire for a penis<sup>31</sup>.

Freudian theories on sexual perversion are linked to these infantile libidinal stages. Pajaczkowska provides some insight on this, noting that these infantile drives:

...are either repressed, sublimated or become integrated in adult genitality. If some aspect of infantile sexuality, its aims and its objects, become fixated, the drives lose their mobility, cannot move onto new objects and becomes stuck. The same aspect of the infantile remains active, and this may either weaken the adult sexual function acting alongside it, or even substitute for it. So there are ways in which some pre-genital drives may remain unintegrated into genital sexuality and may substitute their sexual aims for those of the genital zone, and this is what Freud describes as perversion (Pajaczkowska, 2000:48).

Freud felt that sexual perversions were linked to neuroses, and suggested that 'neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions' (Freud, 1995: 256). He felt that both perversions and neurotic behavior had their roots in the stages of libidinal development in infants, but felt that 'neuroses are the outcome of the unsuccessful repression of these drives, whereas perversions

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<sup>31</sup> Freud makes a later note some ten years after his initial writing on sexuality that the castration complex is perhaps relevant for little girls as well, noting 'We are justified in speaking of a castration complex in women as well. Both male and female children form a theory that women no less than men originally had a penis, but that they have lost it by castration. The conviction which is finally reached by males that women have no penis often leads them to an enduringly low opinion of the other sex' (Freud, 1995: 271 footnoted text).

have, as it were, bypassed repression and are the result of an unsuccessful integration' (Pajaczkowska, 2000:49).

For example, Freud suggests that if during the castration crisis an inappropriate substitute be made for the missing penis, than fetishistic or perverse (sexual) behavior (especially for boys) might ensue: 'The substitutes for this penis which they feel is missing in women play a great part in determining the form taken by many perversions' (Freud, 1995:271) When an inappropriate substitution is made, this often results in a fetish. Freud notes: 'What is substituted for the sexual object is some part of the body (such as the foot or hair) which is in general very inappropriate for sexual purposes' (Freud, 1995: 249). Indeed Metzl notes that the 1959 edition of the *American Handbook of Psychiatry* suggests that 'voyeurism can be interpreted as an attempt at reassurance against castration anxiety. But because such reassurance cannot be obtained, the voyeuristic tendencies become insatiable, sadistic, and displaced to areas other than the genitals' (Metzl, 2004:128). In other words, people (or, as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders suggests, men) engage in a fetishistic activity (such as voyeurism), in order to divert attention from the fear of castration.

Freud maintains that vision and ocular development have important links to the phallic stage; both seeing and awareness of the penis develop at the same time. The coincidence of the scopophilic instinct and the phallic stage has potentially important developmental consequences (Almansi, 1979). Pajaczkowska notes that as the penis becomes significant during this period

...the epistemophilic instinct is organized around the ego's use of sight, and vision is important for ego development and control...the meaning of the penis becomes attached to the aims of seeing and being seen. Here the scopophilic drive with its active, voyeuristic aim, and its passive exhibitionist one is integrally associated with the phallic phase (2000: 25).

During the phallic phase, the use of sight is not only about seeing and being seen; vision also becomes a way of knowing: 'scopophilia becomes the vehicle for curiosity and the visual becomes sought after as the field of proof or knowledge... mystery is overlooked in favor of mastery' (Pajaczkowska, 2000: 34). For boys, the scopophilic phase coincides with the phallic phase and as such voyeurism or scopophilia are often associated with the castration complex; both voyeurism and certain types of scopophilic looking are understood by Freud to be sexual perversions.

Freud argues that in sexual activity a certain amount of both touching and looking are normal. He argues that seeing is an activity that is 'ultimately derived from touching' and that 'visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused' (1995:251). Further, he maintains that: 'The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts' (1995:251). This curiosity and the drive to see can become perverted, however, and the pleasure of looking (scopophilia) becomes a perversion:

(a) if it is restricted exclusively to the genitals or (b) if it is connected to the overriding of disgust (as in the case of voyeurs or people who look on at excretory functions), or if, instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, it supplants it (Freud, 1995: 251).

Based on Freud's understanding of the castration complex, psychiatric understandings of sexual deviance have incorporated a gendered understanding of voyeurism. Metzl suggests this interpretation 'yielded insight into the ways that most men looked- and more often than not, looked at women' (Metzl, 2004:128) and suggests this links to Oedipal development and the castration crisis. Lorand and Schneer suggest that for the voyeur:

...adult sexuality is supplanted by infantile sexuality... his sexual aims... are identical to those of the child... like the neurotic, the deviant has specific pathogenic repressions: he has unconscious Oedipal conflicts and unconscious castration anxiety. Similarly disturbances in genital primacy in neurosis and sexual deviations alike may be attributed to the same factors- anxiety and guilt feelings associated with the Oedipus complex (Lorand and Schneer in Metzl, 2004:128)

These anxieties and the conflicts are associated with Oedipal developments. Apter suggests that women's bodies are the focus of men's visual occupations and notes that the scopophilic gaze: 'fetishizes the female body... (all in an effort to thwart castration anxiety by placing in view a displaceable prosthesis intended to stand in for the missing female phallus) [which] inevitably impersonalizes its object, rendering subjectivity expendable' (Apter, 1991: 98-99).

As women do not have to endure the trauma associated with the threat of castration, there is less opportunity for them to develop fetishes or voyeuristic tendencies. Rather, Freud suggested that, as women did not have a penis, they therefore had a different castration and Oedipal complex. Welldon (1992) notes that this idea means that because women did not have a penis they therefore could not have perversions- they did, however, have neuroses.

### **The Figurative Stare: Understanding the Female Gaze**

Authors such as Kaplan (1991) highlight clinical understandings of female neuroses associated with the phallic stage; for little girls the understanding that they have already been castrated, that they lack a phallus themselves, leads them to penis envy. They admire and desire the phallus to such an extent that their disappointment at not having a penis becomes a

crucial element of their development. Kaplan points to Karl Abraham<sup>32</sup> who suggested that, despite the disappointment of not having a penis of their own, a little girl could go on to be a 'normal' woman if she could only 'reconcile herself to her normal sexual role. She could surmount her childhood mortifications if she would adopt an expectant attitude toward her husband, opening herself to passive sexual gratification and receiving from him the gift of a child- if not the actual penis itself' (Kaplan, 1991:168). If women could just give up this desire to possess the phallus, if they could accept their 'natural' role as (sexually) passive and submissive, if they could abandon their deep rooted desire to be a man, then they might be able to be happy and live a 'normal' life.

Abraham argued that it is this desire to be a man, to possess the phallus, which prevents many women from achieving a normal femininity. Kaplan notes:

Most women have been able to construct remedies for their disappointments... Some women- the masculine types- solve the problem quite simply and directly. They never seem to reconcile themselves to their normal feminine condition. They do not accept the inevitability of the differences between the sexes... Instead, says Abraham, they become homosexual and then adopt the male position in erotic relations with other women. Or they express the wish to be male in a 'sublimated' form by pursuing masculine professions and engaging in masculine occupations (Kaplan, 1991:170).

Abraham suggested that women who wanted to be equal to men or insisted upon this right were acting out desires to be a man. Women who were unable to get over their penis envy enacted masculine positions which then led them to become 'inverts' (homosexuals) or else

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<sup>32</sup> Abraham was a psychiatrist writing in the early 1900s, who is not particularly relevant in modern psychoanalytic theory. However, Kaplan draws on his work here, which is worth highlighting.

was a cause for neurotic (and potentially violent) behavior. For Freud and for many psychoanalysts such as Abraham, men were perverse while women were neurotic. Women by and large did not fit into the perverse category because perversions were linked to psychic processes that mostly affected the development of little boys (and were manifested later in adulthood). These masculine women would manifest their desire for the phallus in a number of neurotic ways- perhaps by ‘poking her frilly parasol in the grass’ or watering their garden ‘with masculine garden hoses’ (Kaplan, 1991:172). Kaplan notes that there were also women

...who proudly bemoan their uncontrollable fixed stare, which unconsciously they equate with an erection. Abraham reported, ‘Just as male exhibitionists seek among other things to terrify women by the sight of their phallus, so these women unconsciously endeavor to attain the same effect... by means of their fixed stare...’ And though Abraham wanted to show that neurosis and perversions were different, he came up with an analogy between the male perversion exhibitionism and the ‘neurotic’ Medusa with her castrating staring eyes (Kaplan, 1991:172).

This stare- the female gaze- is a figurative erection. The power of vision here is obvious; the fixed stare of the masculine woman is a threat to the phallus. This female neurosis- the castrating gaze- is a manifestation of women’s thwarted desire to possess a penis of their own. As well, Slovenko (1965) suggests that there is a ‘rageful, sadistic’ element in female scopophilics which is directly linked to the castration complex: ‘They themselves frequently have strong impulses to destroy or to castrate, and this can be warded off and displaced onto looking in order to avoid...their destructive impulses’ (Slovenko, 1965: 482). Again, we can see here how vision is important, and linked to the castration complex. Enacting the gaze- this fixed castrating stare- is understood as a masculine position. The symbolic order is challenged here as women occupy the role of the watcher. Abraham took great pains to show that this behavior was not in fact a perversion, but something to be understood as neurotic.

Kaplan explicitly argues that women are capable of perversion, despite the fact that perversions are usually rooted in understandings of the male psyche/masculine ideal. She maintains that women are capable of perversion, and often enact perverse behaviors/activities; however, she argues that ‘...social gender ideas of normal femininity are enlisted by the perverse strategy and become the hiding place for some of the female perversions’ (Kaplan, 1991:196). She maintains that women are able to cloak their perversion under the guise of femininity and enlist normative ideas of what women ‘should be’ to hide their perverse actions: ‘...nearly every female perversion disguises vengeful sadistic aims beneath a cloak of feminine masochism...the myth of primary femininity is itself a disguise for the forbidden and frightening masculine ambitions and strivings that “nice” women are not supposed to entertain’ (Kaplan, 1991:200). Chapter Five points to the way women use heterosexual scripts to disavow any sexual interest in the shows, and in this sense use their femininity to hide any sexual or deviant motivation they might have for wanting to see the shows. Western women are able to taint (some) western men watching this kind of entertainment as perverts, because notions of masculine sexuality do not allow men to hide behind a passive feminine identity. Heterosexual gender scripts for men employ an active and striving sexuality, and as such, women can use this understanding of masculine sexuality to hide (or ignore) their own perverse aims.

Kaplan argues that in every perverse script ‘always there is at least a thread of sadomasochism... every perversion is an effort to give some expression to, while controlling, the full strength of potentially murderous impulses to chew up, tear apart, explode, hack to pieces, burn to ashes, rip through to create one hole out of mouth, belly, anus, and vagina’ (Kaplan, 1991: 125). These sadistic aims are a key part of perversions, and post-Freudian psychoanalysts have drawn on ideas around repression and pre-genital drives to suggest that the establishment of perversions ‘have to be seen as having an important dynamic aspect that relates to ego structure more widely’ (Pajaczkowska, 2000:54).

Sadistic (and masochistic) behaviors are specifically enlisted in understandings of voyeurism, Moore and Fine point to sadism in their psychiatric understandings of the term: 'The act of looking itself often carries a sadistic significance' (1990: 203), and Socarides notes that sadistic impulses are related to voyeuristic behaviors: 'The individual wants to see in order to destroy by seeing; or to gain reassurance that the object is not yet destroyed; or else looking itself is unconsciously thought of as a substitute for destroying' (1974: 188). He argues that the eye is used as a weapon, and can be understood as a substitute for the penis, and observes '...sadistic impulses enter into the instinctual aim of looking: one wishes to destroy something by means of looking at it or else the act of looking itself has already acquired the significance of a modified form of destruction' (1974:188). Socarides largely talks about men as voyeurs, but does note that female voyeurs also incorporate these sadistic tendencies, but for women there is 'the fear of engulfment, the fear of being attached to or enclosed in the father's abdomen, a substitute for the mother's abdomen' (1974:188) also for both male and female patients suffering from voyeurism there is an element of sexual sadism due to a fear of engulfment. He suggests the superego function is influential in sadistic behaviors:

The sadistic act not only means 'I kill to avoid being killed', but also 'I punish to avoid being punished'...Unconsciously the sexual sadist may operate on the formula 'If I do something sexual, I have to be punished' (1974:189).

Understanding voyeurism here as a sadistic tendency opens up interesting possibilities for understanding women's (unconscious) desires to see sexual spaces. In their narratives, their understanding of sex workers as both pitiable victims and aggressive temptresses may be explained by this sadistic element of looking – to watch women entertaining people in such a humiliating way, in such a sexual way, does not seem 'hilarious' in the traditional sense. Rather, women's explanations and feelings about these shows perhaps hides their 'fear of engulfment', and allows them to avoid the difficult process of having to recognize the abject

mortification that goes along with pulling live birds out of your vagina to entertain tourists. Women use the gaze here, the powerful all encompassing gaze and focus on looking to the exclusion of other reactions. The sexual shows usually had a horrible stench of beer and sweat, thumping music was often played at extremely high volumes, the tables and seats were often sticky with beer or soda – but these other tangible elements of the experience in these spaces becomes irrelevant as looking relations become the all important element of engagement. If looking becomes a means of destroying, then western women must be, on some level, threatened by the sex workers they come across, or perhaps deeply angry at what is happening at these shows – so angry in fact, that to express this anger would open a flood gate of emotion, and make western women question not only their own involvement with this space, but also the wider gendered and racialized practices that encourage this kind of engagement with Thai sex workers. We might argue that seeing Thai women perform these kinds of acts calls into question women's own gendered identity.

In ping pong shows and in red light areas, western women, as the viewer, are in control of the Other- the panoptic mode allows them 'to penetrate interior recesses, to violate intimacy' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998:413). There is power in looking and Thailand offers western women an opportunity to look and to castigate, to pity, or to be disgusted. Their look may be prurient, but more than that- it is wrapped up in hostility and anger. If, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) suggests, the panoptic approach within tourism offers the opportunity 'to see without being seen', for some western women this means to watch without being watched themselves. Western women are free from the constricting gaze that normally follows them in their own countries- here Thai women are the objects of the gaze.

Stoller generally supports the idea that voyeurism and sadism are linked, and that 'perversion arises as a way of coping with threats to one's gender identity, that is, one's sense of masculinity and femininity' (1986: xii). Perversion, for Stoller, is the 'erotic form of hatred', a fantasy that is often acted out and is a 'habitual preferred aberration necessary for one's full

satisfaction, primarily motivated by hostility' (1986:4). He argues that hostility is different from aggression, as hostile behavior seeks to harm an object, while aggression implies the use of force. He notes that 'hostility in perversion takes form in a fantasy of revenge hidden in the actions that make up the perversion and serves to convert childhood trauma to adult triumph' (Stoller, 1986:4) and observes that voyeurism is a perversion, adding that 'hostility, revenge, triumph and a dehumanized object' (1986: 9) are all essential characteristics of perverse desires, and risk taking is usually part of enacting perverse actions.

Thus, while there seems to be an assumption within psychoanalysis that perversion (and thus voyeurism) is masculine, there has been some recognition that women are firstly sexual beings, and secondly are capable of perversions- thus women can enact voyeuristic behavior; the fact the hostility, revenge, triumph, and sadism are seen as key elements to perverse behavior is telling.

### **Adopting a Male Gaze?: Women as Sexless Subjects**

An important part of understanding male perversions and female neuroses is linked into the way female desire is understood in psychoanalysis. Freud's famous question 'What do women want?' suggests that part of the problem in understanding women as perverts is that women's desire/sexuality is not fully realized. Women here are again defined as lack- they lack a sexual subjectivity that would allow them to pervert this sexual ontology. Benjamin notes:

For Freud, woman's renunciation of sexual agency and her acceptance of object status are the very hallmark of femininity. And though we may refuse his definition, we are nevertheless obliged to confront the painful fact that even today, femininity continues to be identified with passivity, with being the object of someone else's desire, with having no active desire of one's own (Benjamin, 1988:87).

This understanding of women as (un)sexual subjects can be seen in psychoanalytic discussions of voyeurism as well. In his review of the literature on voyeurism, Smith (1976) makes it clear that women can function sexually in similar ways to men. They can enjoy a wide range of sexual activities, including perverted behaviors. He notes that women are capable of voyeuristic activity: ‘...women do respond with sexual stimulation to sexually explicit visual stimuli, e.g. pictures, films, and live men and women. A large portion of women also express voyeuristic interests and have either indulged in such activities or fantasized doing so’ (1976: 593). However, it is only because Smith first acknowledges that women are sexual subjects, that they are not passive objects to be ‘taken’ by men, that they can then become perverts. It seems a good deal of psychoanalytic assumptions that see women as lack, as sexually passive, are thus unable to realize women’s sexual capabilities.

Benjamin works to undo this assumption, and suggests that gender is an important category in psychoanalysis, one that cannot be eliminated; however, she argues that individuals can express ‘male’ and ‘female’ behaviors and can cross over and back between masculine and feminine positions: ‘In the individual’s mind, the gendered self-representation coexists with a genderless or even opposite-gendered self-representation. Thus a person could alternately experience herself as “I, a woman; I a genderless subject; I like-a-man.” A person who can maintain this flexibility can accept all parts of herself, and the other’ (1988: 113). She further suggests that, in order to fully understand women’s desire, merely finding the female equivalent to the phallus will not work; she argues that desire does not have to be represented phallicly but rather ‘...that recognition of the other is the decisive aspect of differentiation...the simultaneous desire for loss of self and wholeness with the other...is really a desire for recognition’ (1988: 126). This alternative approach to female desire is useful for trying to unpick why women might engage in masculine activities, or for exploring how women can enact the (masculine) gaze; acknowledging that women can be active sexual

subjects is essential in recognizing that women can then also subvert 'normal' sexual/gendered patterns.

However, in the particular case of Thailand, women did not seem to be enacting a 'male' gaze, or perhaps were eschewing the masculinization of looking. The survey data highlighted in Chapter Five suggests that women who watched the ping pong shows did not do so to achieve a masculine or a sexual form of looking, but rather focused on the fascination of looking at these Other bodies performing erotic/bizarre tricks for their entertainment.

As well, these women's disavowal of the sexual nature of these experiences suggests perhaps they are enacting what has been seen as masculine, but perhaps is not masculine at all. The idea that gazing is essentially gendered does not work here where there are different power relations at work - women are enacting a gaze but it is not the male gaze that has been traditionally situated.

As Benjamin (1988) notes, gendered identities are never wholly static, but rather shift between identifying as male, as female, as genderless. Women are able to disavow any sexual interest in these shows because the gendered scripts they are following suggest that women's desire should be passive, and here we can see that traditional psychoanalytic renderings of women have reinforced these scripts. Freud did not see women as sexual, or perverse; many of these western women interviewees do not see their interactions with sexual spaces as perverse, or even sexual. Going to a ping pong show necessarily involves looking at naked women, looking at open vaginas, looking at Other women engage in bizarre/sexual behavior. While the customers of the ping pong shows might not be understood as peeping toms, their behavior in other situations (or other time periods) would almost certainly be construed as perverse.

There are a number of factors that take ping pong shows out of the realm of the perverse and into the world of normalcy. The first, as we have already established, is the positioning of the sex industry as normal - as a normal part of any tourist experience. This construction of the sex industry, as normal, helps to remove any deviant element attached to it. As well, the construction of sexual scripts means that many of these women see their behaviors as passive and responsive, rather than active. Their adherence to heterosexually normative scripts also means they can look at Other women without feeling they have been sexually engaging with the sex industry, and the absence of sexuality in their interviews coincides with a lack of recognition within cultural discourses of women as sexual, as active. As Chapter Four has suggested, women tourists did not generally want to visit shows where male sexual acts were taking place. This aversion to male sexuality suggests that a deviance from the heterosexual normative script may jeopardize their testament to passivity.

The next section will argue that a closer look at more recent cultural considerations of what constitutes voyeuristic behavior to reveal a more complicated picture of how these visual interactions might be understood more widely.

### **Women Watching Women: Culture Facilitating Voyeurism**

Jessica Benjamin (1988) notes that understanding women's desires and sexual impulses within a psychoanalytic framework does not require a biological determinist position- the impact of culture in determining women's psychic conditions is an important factor that is sometimes overlooked. While Benjamin is referring here to mothering as a factor in children's development, the point is relevant in a broader context as well- while individual women may indeed suffer from perversions, the women who visit ping pong shows in Thailand are also reacting to cultural stimuli.

Cultural meanings of what constitutes voyeurism mean that these visual activities no longer fit into 'deviant' categories. Bettelheim (1983) suggests that the desire to look or watch is a 'universal experience' that we can all relate to:

Since we have all repeatedly experienced great pleasure in watching something, in taking it in with our eyes, and have occasionally been ashamed of doing so, or even been afraid to look, although we wished to see, it would be easy to have both a direct intellectual and emotional understanding of Freud's concept [of scopophilia] (Bettelheim, 1983: 91).

Recent popular television programs such as 'Big Brother', which boasted 3.2 million UK viewers in June of 2008 (Holmwood, 2008), have invited distinctive cultural interpretations of what is meant by voyeurism. In the UK, Channel 4 broadcasts a number of reality shows (including Big Brother), and won the 'Channel of the Year' at the Broadcasters' Awards in 2008 (Channel 4, 2009); the Channel 4 website provides its own definition of voyeurism, one that demonstrates the shift in the modern discourse and popular understandings of what constitutes voyeuristic behavior:

What is voyeurism? The Oxford Dictionary defines a voyeur as 'a person who gains sexual pleasure from watching others when they are naked or taking part in sexual activity' – but this doesn't quite sum up the whole picture. Most of us are voyeurs in some form or another – it's part of human nature. We are sexually attracted to other people and are therefore titillated by seeing them naked. If we weren't, we probably wouldn't bother having sex at all (Cooper, 2009: online).

Firstly, while modern psychiatry might define voyeurism quite narrowly, for Channel 4 'most of us are voyeurs' - rendering the activity relatively harmless- and because we are sexually attracted to other people, we like seeing them naked, and it becomes 'natural' for all of us to

want to look at naked people or those taking part in sexual activity. Voyeuristic activity is something 'everyone' does, and it is part of human nature and therefore 'normal'. As such, activities like going to strip clubs or ping pong shows are not necessarily problematic, and watching other people having sex is not the whim of some seedy male pervert: pleasure in watching becomes both ordinary and universal, as long as it is done openly, or in public:

...while voyeurism is harmless if it is consensual, it does take a more sinister form when it's a secretive act. Indeed, the second dictionary definition of a voyeur is 'a person who enjoys seeing the pain or distress of others'. Suddenly, it doesn't seem quite so inoffensive. Twenty-first century voyeurism isn't only the bastion of the supposedly harmless 'Peeping Tom', peering through his neighbour's window, hoping to catch a stolen glimpse of her undressing. Neither is it confined to the opportunistic voyeur who hopes to see a skirt blowing up in the wind, or to see some cleavage when his waitress bends down to give him his coffee. Modern technology has allowed voyeurism to evolve. Now, we can not only be watched in private moments without our knowledge, but filmed, too. Your image could be captured without your knowledge in a shop changing room, at the gym or even in your own home. What's more, it could then be broadcast online, on one of the numerous voyeur websites in cyberspace (Cooper, 2009: online)

Apparently voyeurism is 'harmless' if consensual, and only if it's done in secret does it become sinister. Channel 4 provides a second, important definition from the OED that suggests a voyeur is someone who enjoys seeing other people in pain or distress<sup>33</sup>. This alternative reading is crucial, as here we have a move away from a psychoanalytic understanding of voyeurism as a sexual perversion and enter into a much wider (and desexualized) interpretation of what voyeuristic activity can encompass.

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<sup>33</sup> While Channel 4 maintain that this is the OED definition, the current OED online does not provide this second reading of 'voyeur'.

Recent events in Britain highlight the ways in which watching becomes a group experience that ‘everybody’ takes part in. In 2009, Jade Goody, a well-known reality television star, allowed a television station to record the last few months of her life. Living TV attracted near one million viewers who publicly and collectively witnessed the physical deterioration of this young woman, who was clearly terrified at the thought of dying and leaving behind two small children (4fvr, 2009). Watching begets watching, as a few people watch and talk about how sad, or how tragic, or how awful it is to see Jade dying, the wave of people dedicated to consuming this type of ‘entertainment’ grows and swells. The collective act of watching helps facilitate both societal voyeurism, and more individual voyeurism as well.

### **Dark Tourism**

The collective process of tourism and the group element has been highlighted in Chapter Five and tourism theorists have begun to explore issues of voyeurism and the sadistic pleasure of looking, within the emerging genre of dark tourism. Ryan provides a definition:

...while “dark tourism” initially is focused upon sites of horror and destruction its extension toward the bizarre, the morbid and the strange begins to dilute the concept, or to change the nature of the original concern with death to one of a form of tourism whose importance is that it queries the nature of contemporary society (Ryan, 2005:188).

The focus on the bizarre or the strange is relevant here, as the sex industry has certainly been constructed along these lines in tourism literature. Recent analyses have also suggested that dark tourism may be understood as ‘staged around attractions and sites associated with death, [but it can also link to] acts of violence, scenes of disaster and crimes against humanity’ (Danna and Seaton, 2001: 24).

Chris Rojek (1993) was one of the first cultural theorists to grapple with the issue of 'dark tourism'. He argues that spectacle and sensation have become dominant values, and further suggests that within this 'excremental culture', death and fatality dominate the social landscape. Drawing on Rojek's (1993) work on dark tourism, Wight suggests that the reactions of visitors to dark sites is that of a 'private enjoyment of pleasure in the events associated with those sites, intimating schadenfreude, [which] is a common motivation for visitors to such dark sites' (Wight, 2006:120).

Other theorists have expanded on this notion of 'black spot' or dark tourism (Miles, 2002; Strange and Kempa, 2003; Preece and Price, 2005; Ryan, 2005; Sharpley, 2005; Smith and Croy, 2005; Wight, 2005; Stone and Sharpley, 2008) and Seaton (1996) suggests that dark tourism is not limited to a (post)modern fascination with death, but rather has always been an aspect of (tourist) society. He notes that people in the middle-ages were preoccupied with death; many kept death masks and effigies to remind them of their mortality, and pilgrimages were made to death sites of martyrs and saints. Seaton argues that this fascination with death increases in the Romantic era, crescendoing into the 19<sup>th</sup> century: two examples include a tourist guide to Highgate Cemetery in London that was published in 1865 (Ryan, 2005:189), another example is the rise in the number of people in the late 1800s who gathered to watch public hangings of criminals. Seaton suggests that this obsession with death has become exacerbated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the development of broadcast media, which has helped not only to widely publicize disaster events, but also, importantly, the media links these catastrophes to specific locations. The effect of this emphasis on specific geographic locations has been the increase in tourism to these areas, which have been made famous by these media representations. Lisle (2004) argues that the combination of media images of events/places as well as the tourist opportunity to see these sites helps fuel 'our desire to consume sites of atrocity' (2004: 4).

This desire to visit sites associated with human suffering correlates with postmodern consumption practices. Sharpley (2005) suggests that consumption is a central signifier of the postmodern society and notes:

...postmodern societies have come to be defined by consumption; not only has the practice of consumption become simplified, but the significance of consumption (and hence, the meaning of goods and services) has increased. A given object (including a tourism experience) may be consumed in a variety of ways by different people according to the cultural meaning they attach to it and, therefore, a focus on consumption practices, or how people consume goods and services, transcends the characteristics of specific objects of consumption (Sharpley, 2005:221).

It could be argued that the sexual spectacles on offer to tourists in Thailand do depict violent scenes (a woman pouring burning wax on her naked flesh, or pulling multiple razor blades out of her vagina could certainly be seen as violent), and if western women watch these shows thinking that the sex workers they are visually consuming are likely to die from AIDS, then reconsidering these sexual spectacles as sites of dark tourism becomes tenable. Indeed, we might argue that this kind of tourist activity is at the darkest end of the dark tourism spectrum, as tourists are not accessing sites where atrocities have happened, or disaster locations – but are instead consuming the real live bodies of sex workers act as both objects of horror and objects of sexual fantasy for voyeuristic tourists to consume.

Going back to Stoller arguments about the voyeurism and its sadistic nature, we might argue that perhaps western women are engaged in a type of sadistic behavior where they enjoy watching the pain and humiliation of Other women. If, as Stoller argues, perversion is the ‘erotic form of hatred’, a fantasy that is often acted out and is a ‘habitual preferred aberration necessary for one’s full satisfaction, primarily motivated by hostility’ (1986:4) then can we argue that women going to watch Other women pulling dozens of razor blades out of their

vaginas, or women pouring burning hot wax over their bodies is a sadistic scenario? Are they enacting a sadistic female gaze in their visual engagement with the Other? I argue that their actions, when couched in these terms, are certainly hostile.

### **A Racialized Female Gaze?**

There are a number of theorists within critical theory and film theory that have argued for a female gaze. Theorists such as Edward Snow (1989) argue against the static notion of the masculine positioned gaze. He asks if a theory such as this might serve to 'become an unwitting agent of the very forces of surveillance it wishes to oppose' (1989: 31). He suggests that:

Nothing could better serve the paternal superego than to reduce masculine vision completely to the terms of power, violence, and control, to make disappear whatever in the male gaze remains outside the patriarchal, and pronounce outlawed, guilty, damaging and illicitly possessive every male view of woman. It is precisely on such grounds that the father's law institutes and maintains itself in vision. A feminism not attuned to internal difference risks becoming the instrument rather than the abrogator of that law (Snow, 1989:31).

Snow maintains that by reexamining the ways that 'male' and 'female' function, perhaps it is possible to arrive at a 'gaze' that is not so deterministically masculine. His examination of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* suggests the male gaze should be reconsidered as the painting opens a field of vision that is 'one of pre-oedipal contentment, not phallic capture'. He maintains that perhaps the traditional critiques of the male gaze '...in terms of its hegemony and controlling power would be to grant it exactly the reality it lacks, and this yet again become complicit in the order of things one wants to undermine' (Snow, 1989:40). Snow is arguing that to give credence to the male gaze, to suggest that this masculine gaze has

primacy and control, is to ascribe to it a power that it does not exclusively have. Of course Snow is not making an argument here for an alternative female gaze, but challenging the dominance of the theory about the construction of an inherently masculine gaze leaves room to start to understand structures of gender/power/looking in alternative ways.

bell hooks (2003) writes about what she calls the 'oppositional gaze'. She argues that there is an inherent power in looking- and suggests that black people, slaves in particular, have been punished for looking, or more precisely looking back. She argues that the gaze has been a form of resistance for colonized peoples, and notes the subversive power that looking can have:

Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating awareness politicizes 'looking relations- one learns to look a certain way in order to resist (2003:95).

She argues that most black people in American first 'looked' at whites via film and television: '...you learned to look at white people by staring at them on the screen' (2003: 95). The gaze of the black man was constructed as particularly dangerous, but in the quiet glow of the television screen black men were finally free to look at whomever they wanted, however they wanted. hooks argues that the black male gaze was thus constructed in a different way: 'In their role as spectators, black men could enter an imaginative space of phallogentric power that mediated racial negation' (2003: 96). She argues that, because of this, black male film makers cast black women as objects of this phallogentric gaze. Further, she argues that black female spectators have had to deal with a double-edged sword, where they are both subject to negative images of black women in film, and forced to deny their own existence:

...black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the “body” of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship where the women to be looked at and desired is ‘white’ (2003:96).

Representations of black women in film were often negative, and hooks argues that few black women were able to identify with the black female characters that actually did appear on screen.

The response to this was varied: for some black women, the black female gaze has been constructed as a ‘masochistic look of victimization’- where black women transform themselves into the white woman that they see on screen (for example in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*); for other black women the solution was to abrogate the gaze completely- to look away, turn away in protest and refuse to see. hooks argues that her response was to develop an ‘oppositional gaze’: ‘Not only would I not be hurt by the absence of black female presence, or the insertion of violating representation, I interrogated the work, cultivated a way to look past race and gender’ (hooks, 2003:99). She argues that ‘Black female spectators actively chose not to identify with the film’s imaginary subject because such identification was disabling’ (2003: 99) and instead adopted an oppositional gaze that ruptured the traditional (phallogentric) function of the masculine gaze.

Importantly, hooks argues that race has been neglected in feminist understandings of the male gaze- ‘woman’ in this context is actually ‘white woman’ and racial difference has often been unacknowledged. hooks suggests this ‘speaks to the problem of structuring feminist film theory around a totalizing narrative of woman as object whose image functions solely to reaffirm and reinscribe patriarchy’ (hooks, 2003: 99) - this totalizing ‘effaces the difference between women in specific socio-historical contexts, between women defined precisely as historical subjects rather than as *a* psychic subject (or non-subject)’ (2003: 100). Further, she

argues that entering race as a category of analysis renders much feminist film theory problematic as it means that gender/sex/sexuality is no longer situated as the 'primary and/or exclusive signifier of difference' (2003: 100).

Kaite (1995) suggests that when thinking about spectatorship and looking, 'the spectator may be activated in one of two looks... the narcissistic look and the voyeuristic look. Narcissism refers to a look which enhances identification with signs of one's own self or body; the voyeuristic look is allied with the look of the camera' (Kaite, 1995: 69). If we think of the way looking functions, and keep race included as a category of analysis, it seems possible to suggest that white women spectators/tourists are enacting a voyeuristic gaze here: they are not looking at the bodies of Thai women and seeing a reflection of themselves, they are not identifying with the Other- rather they are inscribing and reifying difference and looking at these Other bodies, visually consuming these Other bodies in a voyeuristic way. hooks argues that: 'The extent to which black women feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized in this society determines the scope and texture of their looking relations' (hooks, 2003:102). This remark is rather telling, as certainly Thai women, Thai sex workers, are routinely dehumanized and objectified, not only within Thai society, but as a result of this voyeuristic gaze that places them in an abject/object position.

But perhaps there is something more to hooks' suggestion that: 'black female spectators actively chose not to identify with the film's imaginary subject because such identification was disabling' (hooks, 2003:99). This problem is relevant for western women in Thailand as well- if western women were to identify with the real (rather than imaginary) subject, the Thai woman dancing in stage in front of them, what impact would this have on their psychic processes? Surely to some extent it would be disabling- to see women so divested of subjectivity, to watch women be humiliated and degraded in front of a crowd of people- to look at Thai women as 'sisters', would be a difficult thing to do.

The problem comes in the way the gaze is dealt with- for hooks, who argues that the result of this dis-identification was for black women to adopt an oppositional gaze- western women in this context seem to appropriate the voyeuristic gaze. Whilst Mulvey (1975; 1981) might suggest that a (white) female gaze is possible if it adopts a masculine position (where female spectators are, in essence, 'transvestites')- this explanation does not go far enough for understanding the dynamics at work in the western female tourist/Thai female sex worker dyad. Simply suggesting that western women are adapting/adopting a masculine gaze does not work because the gaze here is also wrapped up in ideas about race and culture. This female gaze that we see in Thailand must be understood in the context of race and gender, and this goes further than just suggesting it's an extension of the masculine gaze. Western women looking at Other women, maybe even western women objectifying and dehumanizing Other women - the way that race and power are at work here means that our understandings of voyeurism as something that only men do need to be reevaluated.

The importance of race as a category of analysis has implications for our understanding of the (female) tourist gaze. Tourism processes are implicated in the way local people, and in this case sex workers, become the object of the gaze. It is possible to argue that tourism processes often work not to reaffirm and reinscribe patriarchy, but rather also serve to reaffirm the Otherness of Others, and the normalness of 'us'. Carter argues that:

...the international tourism industry constructs, commodifies and markets exoticized and deeply gendered images of non-European host societies that stress the passivity and enduring 'Otherness' of a country's citizens (Carter, 1998: 244).

This relationship between gender, sexuality, class, nation, and race is complicated. Women's sexuality is often understood in these terms, with 'all' women being seen as passive and Other. This understanding of female sexuality as passive, as we have seen in both psychoanalysis and cultural readings of 'gender scripts', assumes that this gendered

relationship is the primary source of identity for most people, and as such 'all' men can be understood in one way while 'all' women can be understood in another way. However, as post-colonial and black feminists have pointed out, 'all' women are not understood in the same way, and the scripts that drive and determine behavior in one place in one time are driven by a variety of motivating factors, some predicated on gender, some on sexuality, some on race, some on nation- the way that we interact with our world is dynamic and changes as we move through time and space, and encounter different people and different situations. As such, white western women in Thailand are able to act out a different version of femininity than they usually do in their own countries, and as we have seen in Chapter Five, their understanding of their femininity sits in contrast with the exoticized and racialized femininity of Thai women. In this instance race may be the more important category of identity, and gender becomes less important, or subsumed beneath nation and race. As we saw in Chapter Five, women felt themselves to be lucky to be *western women* – in opposition to their Thai counterparts. The specific context of Thailand here and western women's role within this space needs to be understood from both a gendered and a raced perspective.

One of the most interesting aspects of the research was the way many of the participants failed to acknowledge or even suggest that racial difference may have played a part in their interactions with the Others they encounter. They very rarely mention race in their interviews. It is worth thinking here beyond race, to consider the ways that ethnicity also function in these processes of consumption. I refer here to Nagel's influential work on race and ethnicity, where she highlights the inter-relational aspects of race, ethnicity, and nationalism. She suggests that: 'Ethnicity can be a signifier not only of somatic or physical (racial) differences, but also of differences in language, religion, region, or culture'. She argues that ethnicity is performative: 'where ethnic boundaries are constituted by day to day affirmations, reinforcements, and enactments of ethnic differences' as well as performed: 'where individuals and groups engage in ethnic "presentations of self"' (Nagel, 2000: 110-111). The bounds of ethnicity are not only demarcated along the lines of race or some physical

difference, but rather must be constantly negotiated and iterated depending on the space/place/context of any given interaction: ‘ethnicity is a dialectical process that arises out of interactions between individuals and audiences’ (2000: 111). Power is an essential feature of inscribing ethnicity, and populations are divided along ethnic lines. The differences that might mark people, language, skin color, religious belief, or culture can be divisive and sites of conflict. Sexuality intersects ethnicity: ‘It is the sexualized nature of things ethnic, racial, and national that heats up discourse on the values, attributes, and moral worth of “us” and “them”’ (2000:124).

Western women in this study did not talk about the skin color of the sex workers, or comment on the race of the women they were watching, but they did situate Thai women (not just sex workers) as distinctly different, as Other in some way to themselves. As the survey material in Chapter Five shows, they often saw Thai culture as distinctly different to western culture, agreeing it was more ‘open’ and ‘natural’ about sex, while others seemed to position the sex industry in Thailand as part of Thai culture, with some women tourists suggesting that prostitution was a ‘normal’ part of Thai culture.

Many of the participants’ interpretations of the sex industry, and those involved in the sex tourism scene, were based upon their own identities, as tourists, as women, as western women. These survey results suggest that many of the participants felt that Thai culture was somehow more ‘naturally’ sexual than Western culture- different in the way that sex and sexuality is understood.

In an interview with Callie, she tells me that despite being warned about sex workers in Thailand, she has heard they are actually ‘completely normal people’:

**Callie:** Everyone has said, ‘Watch out for the prostitutes,’ and stuff like that. I was speaking to someone who had stayed with some prostitutes for 2 months and he said

that they are completely normal people. They just have to go and have sex for money. That's just what they do. It's just a way of life, really and it's probably not ideal... I would love to go and talk to one, to be honest and just find out how they go about it because I can sit here and go, 'Oh, it's disgusting,' but if they don't see anything wrong with it...it's not harming anyone outwardly.

Callie's understanding of sex work as disgusting, and her original understanding of sex workers as abnormal is challenged by her friend, who actually spent time with prostitutes and reveals that in fact, these women are 'completely normal'. Still, Callie would like to go 'talk to one; to see 'how they go about it' – which suggests she is still confused by Thai women's ability to work as prostitutes. If these women can find a way to normalize their experience, then she won't have to feel so disgusted by what they do. This excerpt reveals a tension in the way that western women situate their experiences with Thai Others in relation to their own national/western identity.

Kaplan notes that:

Travel implicitly involves looking at, and looking relations with, peoples different to oneself...while travel may destabilize a fixed notion of culture, it heightens a sense of national belonging. People's identities when they are traveling are often more self-consciously *national* than when they stay home. In addition, travel provokes conscious attention to gender and racial difference' (Kaplan, 1997:5-6, original emphasis).

The mechanisms of travel and tourism help in constructing the gaze, and enable (and empower) western women to gaze upon Thai Others. Johnston (2001) argues that tourism practices are constructed around ideas of difference, exoticism, and displacement.

Tourism practices can produce gendered and raced dichotomies, where the self is only understood in relation to the Others encountered in certain spaces/places, and these opposing ontologies are not innocent (Coleman and Crang, 2002). Thai Others are seen as lesser, as baser, as sexual, erotic, different... The status of western women is heightened by their engagement with these sexualized others. Stallybrass and White note the importance of this eroticized engagement with the Other, and remark on the role of status in this equation:

The 'top' *includes* the 'low' symbolically as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and desire in the construction of subjectivity' (Stallybrass and White in Walkowitz, 1992: 20, original emphasis).

The status difference between Thai women and western women is produced by unequal touristic and racialized discourses, where Thai sex workers become the eroticized, less objects to be consumed by elevated western tourists.

### **A Return to the Fetish: Race and Perversion**

The inclusion of these racialized differences in constructing an understanding fetishistic behaviors has a profound effect on the way that we can understand western women's engagement with the sex industry- and their relation to Other Thai women. Western women, while working to differentiate themselves from Thai sex workers, also admit their fascination in watching these Other bodies being tortured. When I asked Loreta why she thought people went to see ping pong shows, if not for sexual gratification, she says:

**Loreta:** Certainly people seemed to be going for the element of fascination rather than any sexual element...

This fascination links into Freudian understandings of fetishism, as western women are enacting a voyeuristic gaze: they are gazing with fascination at a particular sexualized object. Kaplan notes that: 'In every script [of perverse enactments] something or someone is treated as a fetish object, which is why fetishism is considered the prototype of all sexual perversions' (Kaplan, 1991: 125). This objectification and dehumanization of Thai women that goes along with the fetish is important - and is certainly an element of voyeuristic activity.

McClintock (1995) highlights how fetishism works here in a historical and cultural context. She suggests that fetishism as a term was originally coined in the late 1700s by Charles de Brosses 'as a term for "primitive religion"' and that Marx adapted this term to incorporate 'the idea of primitive magic to express the central social form of the modern industrial economy' (1995, 181) and so redefined fetishism as commodity fetishism. It was Freud, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that instilled the idea of perversion as analogous to sexually fetishistic behavior.

However, it is no coincidence that Freud developed his ideas around fetishism at the same time as colonizing discourses rendered primitive, exotic Others as racial and social deviants. McClintock argues: 'The invention of *racial* fetishism became central to the regime of sexual surveillance, while the policing of *sexual* fetishism became central to the policing of the "dangerous classes", both in Europe and in the colonies. Colonized peoples were figured as *sexual* deviants, while the gender deviants were figured as *racial* deviants' (McClintock, 1995: 182 original emphasis). Indeed Freud himself suggested that the aggression seen in fetishism might be understood as a latent manifestation of cannibalistic desire. McClintock argues that reducing fetishism to the phallic order is problematic 'as it runs the risk of flattening out the hierarchies of social difference, thereby relegating race and class to secondary status along a primarily sexual signifying chain' (1995: 183-184). She argues for

the inclusion of race and class in the formation and understanding of fetishism. This extract from McClintock is worth noting at length:

Far from being merely phallic substitutes, fetishes can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level. These contradictions may originate as social contradictions but are lived with profound intensity in the imagination and the flesh. The fetish thus stands at the cross-roads of psychoanalysis and social history, inhabiting the threshold of both personal and historical memory. The fetish marks a crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution. The contradiction is displaced onto and embodied in a fetish object, which is thus destined to recur with compulsive repetition. Hence the apparent power of the fetish to enchant the fetishist. By displacing power onto the fetish, then manipulating the fetish, the individual gains symbolic control over what might otherwise be terrifying ambiguities. For this reason, the fetish can be called an impassioned object (McClintock, 1995: 184).

Situating fetishism as something more complex than simply phallic, and recognizing the social and cultural aspects, allows for a nuanced investigation of fetishism, one that crucially identifies *difference* as the key marker of distinguishment. Power is displaced onto the fetish in order to (symbolically) *control this difference*.

McClintock argues that different understanding of value within colonialism allowed for 'enlightened' Europeans to measure themselves favorably to the black Others they came across. African Others were considered to have few of the noble traits that marked out Europeans: '...the fetish-lands of Africa embodied a necessary universe of errors against which the Enlightenment could measure its stately progress...fetishism was primarily a discourse about cultural conflicts in value, which allowed Europeans to do two things. First, they could draw the unfamiliar and unaccountable cultures of the works into a systemic

universe of *negative* value; second, they could represent this universe as deviant and thereby undervalue and negate it' (McClintock, 1995: 188, original emphasis). This understanding of fetishism resonates with the way western women inscribe Thai Others as deviants- western women are able to visit these shows as part of their tourist experience, as part of an 'authentic' engagement with Thai culture that sees Thai women as both victims and whores.

Prostitution in Thailand is normal, it is expected, and constructing Thai women as natural prostitutes. It allows western women to visit and visually explore the sex industry without having to morally condemn it. As prostitution has already been rendered unproblematic, and Thai women rendered as Others, it becomes acceptable to go and have a look and experience these sexualized spaces.

McClintock (1995; 2001) suggests that recognizing race (and class) differences becomes all the more important if we think about the ways the multiple subjectivities that different women occupy. She argues that 'women' as a unified category are assigned as 'disempowered, tongueless, unsexed' within psychoanalysis, and as such are always the 'objects of fetishism but never the subjects' (1995, 193), but this does not take into account the ways in which women relate to Other women- 'how does one begin to talk (as a woman) of different power relations *between* women...When we speak and act as different women, the Self/Other dichotomy begins to totter and relations with the Other becomes relations with others' (1995, 193). It becomes helpful to consider this process of Othering within the context of a reevaluated psychoanalysis- one that recognizes the cultural/racial components of the equation. This interrogation of psychoanalytic ideas around fetishism suggests the phallus and the ensuing castration anxiety are a crucial part of deviant development that allows for a more powerful analysis of how Othering functions.

### Processes of Othering: Race and Voyeurism

The importance of visual consumption in the creation of an Other and the relation to power is something that has been seen in both feminist and post-colonial literature and provides a useful way for understanding women's complex interactions with sexual spaces. Bhabha (1983) suggests that the discourses of Otherness centre upon a dichotomy that presents the Other as both an object of desire *and* derision. He argues that:

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference - racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power (Bhabha, 1983:19).

The body is symbolically imagined, but the visual processes by which some bodies are consumed works to create a sense of difference and reinforce notions of Otherness. Bergner (1995) argues that 'seen' Others becomes objects of a violent gaze that negatively impacts racial identity; this visual violence is experienced by the body.

Bhabha (1993) argues: 'The white man's eyes break up the black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed'. Visually consuming the Other necessitates a crossing of boundaries, an act of transgression that is manifested corporeally. However, different bodies are visually consumed differently: the impact of women consuming exotic, Thai women highlights an Othering process that is wrapped up in racial, gender, and sexual politics.

Bhattacharyya argues that exotic fantasies often rely upon racist structures as she argues:

In exoticism the desired object is your slave, your enemy, your absolute other- the desire may fixate on the anticipation of danger or the pleasure of dominating the weak or the adventure of an alien and forbidden experience, but each scenario demands that the object has less agency and access to mainstream power than the one who desires (2002, 107).

The processes of tourism encourage a voyeuristic engagement with 'native' peoples, and the creation of a tourist identity seems to engender a situation where Othering is part of the process. Aitchison (2001) provides some analysis of this point, suggesting that people define themselves in contrast to other people, and this construction of the Other coexists with power relations, whereby Others are necessarily seen as lesser.

Literature on sex tourism has also pointed to this Othering process (Enloe, 1989; Johnston, 2001; Jeffreys, 2003). Bhattacharyya makes specific arguments about the role of sex tourism as a modern day facilitator of exotic encounters and argues that sex tourism:

...sells a momentary pretence of... imperial omnipresence. In the moment of buying sexual services abroad, every tourist can imagine themselves as a GI, embodying the epitome of military power and popular culture cool. Exoticism is as much about these fantasies of becoming a powerful subject as it is about access to the subjugated body of the other (2002: 121).

Bhattacharyya (2002) makes a persuasive argument about the nature of the 'exotic' and how it links to power; drawing on a definition that suggests that the exotic highlights elements of the foreign, the bizarre, the strange; she examines the ways in which exoticism and the western desire for the exotic (erotic) other can reveal complicated power structures; she ties this specifically into ideas around racialized difference. This focus on race is important as she considers the way that the gaze is an essential aspect of exercising power over the exotic,

racialized, sexualized Other. In order to maintain power and control over the exotic Other, there must be a way to recognize that the Other is lesser and more abject. But, Bhattacharyya argues, in a shifting geopolitical world, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain this power hierarchy effortlessly. She suggests that:

...exoticism reflects some other, more basic, reality- so the titillated gaze is enabled by material power and privilege, and the vulnerability to becoming the object of that gaze comes from a lack of material power and privilege...it also assumes that the exercise of that exoticizing gaze fulfills some need for the powerful (2002, 105-106).

Bhattacharyya makes explicit reference here to the way that racialized/sexualized Others are placed in a vulnerable position by the materially (and racially, politically, socially) privileged. The Other becomes the object of the (tourist) gaze and this gaze, this powerful, exoticizing gaze, is made possible by the inherent power of the viewers/watchers/tourists. In order to maintain this gaze, the object of the gaze must be suitable- they must be sufficiently authentic/different/exotic in order to become Other enough to be visually consumed. We might argue that some western tourists do not go to Thailand to look at western sex workers- they come to look at the exoticized, sexualized, racialized Thai women- who are not only markers of Thailand, but also function as a sign/symbol of dangerousness/Otherness. Bhattacharyya maintains that: 'More than everyday versions of desire, the exotic relies upon an explicit and comprehensible power disparity. Without the sense that the object of desire is lesser, dangerous, forbidden- alluringly other and beyond any everyday social contact- there is no exoticist dynamic' (2002: 106). This exoticization of Thai women renders them simultaneously lesser and dangerous in the gaze of western women.

However, Bhattacharyya also suggests that part of this desire for the racial Other is wrapped up in masculine notions of military power Sex tourism is not just about imperial presence, it is about male imperial presence. Yet we have to reconfigure this assumption that suggests sex

tourism and the (sexual) gaze is about men operating an imperial, powerful gaze over the exotic/erotic/female object. Indeed, how might we shift this understanding if we recognize that western women are also consuming (sexual) entertainment as part of a tourist experience? To suggest that western women see themselves as masculine GIs seems implausible, but acknowledging that 'normal' tourism encounters and 'sexual' tourist encounters are blurred is an important point. The desire for the bodies of exotic/erotic others is something that exists for both male and female tourists, sometimes in different ways, but the bodies of Thai women become the commodified objects of both the male and female tourist gaze. The importance of race and its interaction with sexuality in the tourist space, coupled with the presence and actions of even some western women in these arenas, especially when they are assumed to be uninterested, or absent from these sites, opens up a new area for debate.

However, while Bhabha and Bhattacharyya provide some insights into the way racist structures work to position the Other as Other within tourism processes- both of their perspectives point to an inherently masculinized way of understanding Othering in this context. Western women's engagement with the sex industry in Thailand has not been taken into account when considering the ways that sex tourism processes function. This is not to suggest that colonialism does not play a part in this scenario, but rather that a gendered interpretation of women's engagement in these spaces must be included in the processes of Othering. The racist and eroticizing gaze of the western tourist is not limited to the gaze of the male sex tourist. Women are not generally engaging with discourses of sexual desire when talking about their engagements with the sex industry, but neither are they dismissing the power that they have vis-à-vis the Thai sex workers they gaze upon.

### **Gazing at a Colonial Past?: The (neo)imperial gaze**

Working with the framework of colonial theory, several theorists have explored the way that western women were able to achieve a certain degree of power in colonial regimes that

facilitated the development of a female gaze. Working within literary theory, Marx (1998) argues that a female imperial gaze was prevalent during the colonial period in India. He suggests that during this period men were in charge of viewing the landscape through a 'scientific' lens: their orders were to survey and map the land; women were left the task of capturing the 'picturesque'. This 'sexual division of gazes' meant that men and women were left to see/imagine India in different ways:

The Survey took possession of India in its totality, while the women of Anglo-India consumed the subcontinent piece by tiny and highly textured piece. They traveled about India much as English tourists hiked through the Lake Region in search of a visual field whose surface could be captured by the pencil... Anglo-Indian women painted India's mountains and hills, its villages and bazaars...and, above all, its curious natives with their colorful attire (Marx, 1998:56).

Here we have an important recognition that women were in this ambivalent position where they were at once the subordinates of their white male compatriots, but at the same time in a superior position to all the 'curious natives' they happened to encounter. In this strange space/place where the normal power of the masculine vision was suspended, women were able to adopt a framing gaze all their own. It is hardly surprising that it was not only the beautiful landscapes that they sought to capture, but importantly, the exotic, strange, Brown Other (c.f. Pratt, 1992).

Kaplan (1997) makes a compelling argument about the nature of the gaze, and links psychoanalytic theories of the gaze with the imperial gaze. She argues the development of the Freudian theory of the masculine gaze was developed at a time when popular culture/science was becoming increasingly aware of the power of visual technologies:

The end of the nineteenth century was also the moment that psychoanalysis was “invented” by Freud, and many theorists have seen a connection among all these phenomena- colonialism, psychoanalysis, cinema. It is no accident that Freud used myths of Oedipus and the Sphinx to link the development of civilization and the development of the psyche. Freud’s psychoanalytic binary id/superego parallels the primitive/civilized dichotomy, which “civilized” peoples negotiate through the ego- something that Freud’s theory denies women and people categorized as “primitive”. (Kaplan, 1997:62).

Kaplan suggests that both women and exotic others were cast in this lesser role, which impacted on the way that Freud developed his psychoanalytic theories. She maintains that there is a link between travel and looking:

Travel implicitly involves looking at, and looking relations with, peoples different to oneself. In James Clifford’s words, “If we rethink culture and its science, anthropology, in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalizing bias of the term culture- seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies etc.- is questioned. Constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction come more sharply into view”. But paradoxically, while travel may destabilize a fixed notion of culture, it heightens a sense of national belonging. People’s identities when they are traveling are often more self-consciously national than when they stay home. In addition, travel provokes conscious attention to gender and racial difference (Kaplan, 1997:5-6).

This attention to racial difference is of critical importance as this is the central way in which some western women are able to attain a relatively powerful status in Thailand. Bergner notes the importance of race in ascribing power to western women:

...colonial relation allocates social power according to skin color rather than penis possession, the phallus is a less appropriate marker of social power-the penis even less so-and castration seems a less encompassing description of lack. To say that the phallus corresponds to whiteness is not to unhinge the phallus from the penis but to complicate the association (Bergner, 1995:79).

The importance of race cannot be underestimated here; (white) western women are able to occupy this visually powerful position because of their racial/social positioning- and as such they are able to voyeuristically consume Thai/Other women and at the same time render these Others as objects. Kaplan suggests that gaze creates a master/subject, subject/object relationship, which is always in danger of being overwhelmed:

The imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central, much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject... Anxiety prevents this gaze from actually seeing the people gazed at... Anxiety, in this case, is displaced into a condescending paternalism. The anxiety arises from the fragility of being in the "master" position. Masters unconsciously know that mastery cannot remain forever theirs: there's always the threat of being toppled (Kaplan, 1997:78-79).

Certainly the gaze of western women is focused and directed by tourist literature- Thai women's bodies are marked out as signs and symbols of the 'real' Thailand, but many of these participants actively work to inscribe Thai women as sexualized, racialized, victimized Others. Thai women are all at once described as submissive, sexually aggressive, and hapless victims. This is in contrast to the way western women describe themselves, as powerful and independent. The bodies of sex workers become fascinating and yet at the same time are disgusting or horrifying. Western women who venture into sexualized venues may not see these shows as sexual, and they may not be trying to achieve some kind of masculine

position, but they are in a position of power that enables them to objectify these Other women.

It can be argued that the sadistic impulses that Stoller (1986) describes can be seen played out here. Thai women, obviously attractive to thousands upon thousands of western men, are in a sense competition for western women. Perhaps the impulse to visually consume mirrors their impulse to literally consume, to eat up Thai women and destroy them. Visiting a go-go bar or a ping pong show in Thailand is necessarily about visiting a place where western men go to desire the Other. Visiting these venues in some way signifies a hostile/sadistic turn, and the women want to destroy their competitors- to eat up the Thai women and destroy them. By visually consuming the sex workers' bodies they are able to fix Thai women in place, employing neo-imperial narratives of the Other as less, as lack- and in this way they are able to see themselves as better: as more feminine, as more independent, as more civilized. Their engagement with these spaces is not necessarily erotic, but it is hostile.

Assiter posits that to position men as the sole 'authors and readers of representational artifacts, and women its objects, is to forget about the role of class and race. These complicate any perspective which has men in the position of power and women are the powerless victims' (Assiter, 1991:108). Indeed western women seem to be enacting a neo-imperial stance with the sexualized, racialized Thai women the focus of this gaze; in order to fully understand the western female gaze, we must engage more critically with race and ethnicity and how these into women's desire to watch/see Thai woman as sexualized/racialized objects.

### **Too Close for Comfort: Moving Beyond the Gaze**

A useful way of exploring women's underlying positioning of Other way is to look at what happens when their engagement with the Other shifts- when they are no longer able to control

their visual engagement because somehow the Other has crossed the normal lines that mark out the boundaries of acceptable limits.

Some of the female participants were eager to see the sex industry, some talked about their desire to visually consume sexual spaces, but when their engagement moved beyond the visual in the realm of touch and actual physical engagement, their interpretation of these sexual spaces and the sexual Others that inhabited these arenas shifted. As the bodies of sex workers came nearer to the bodies of the female tourists, this move into the physical prompted anxiety for many of the participants.

One of the many tricks at a ping pong show, in fact the namesake trick, entails Thai sex workers inserting a ping pong ball into their vagina and shooting the ball out at customers sitting in the audience. Many of the ping pong shows take place on a stage that is placed above the head-level of audience members, and sometimes customers are asked to hold a glass or other container to catch the ping pong ball as it shoots out. This particular trick causes hijinks amongst the audience, as ping pong balls do not always shoot straight. Stray ping pong balls that accidentally come into contact with audience members usually result in very quick moving or screaming as the customers attempt to avoid coming into contact with the ball. Sex workers will sometimes ask customers to pick up balls that have landed astray usually to comic effect as their audience member either outright refuses to touch the ball, or picks it up with obvious disgust that usually draws a laugh from other spectators. This disinclination of customers to touch anything tainted by the bodily excretions of the sex worker says something about the nature of polluted bodies and the way 'dirty' bodies are encountered and managed by 'clean' bodies.

The disgust associated with the proximity of sex workers belies a more complicated interaction that cannot so summarily be dismissed as asexual. Miller notes that 'Disgust rules

mark the boundaries of self...Disgust also figures in the attractions and repulsions of the sexual' (1997:xi).

Bodies that are closer become possessed with the potentiality for danger; as such the proximity of bodies can impact on the arrangement of social space: 'Faced with a stranger, with a different cultural history and hence a different corporeal schema, one's own lived body may exhibit intolerance or resistance to the encounter' (Diprose in Ahmed, 2000:50).

This management of boundaries can also be seen in the ways that western women react to sex workers touching them or coming into contact with them. In an interview with Mandy and her partner Laura on Patong Beach in Phuket, we were talking about various tricks that we had seen at ping pong shows. She and her partner had been to a number of ping pong shows over the course of their trip and had told me how enjoyable they found the shows. I asked Mandy:

**Interviewer:** Did you know about the show before you came over?

**Mandy:** Oh yes.

**Interviewer:** Was it something you thought you wanted to do or try?

**Mandy:** Well we had to. I wanted to try it because we got told about the balloon popping so we went to see that on the first night. The first night in Pattaya we went to see one.

**Interviewer:** Did you see the balloon trick?

**Mandy:** Yes, we saw it all...It's like a pipe and they put a dart in it and she aims it and she pops it. Then they blow the whistle.

**Laura:** Have you seen the one with the beer or the coca-cola? How the hell do they manage to do it?

**Interviewer:** A friend of mine was saying that she saw the coke one once and it was handed to the man at the bar who drank the whole glass of coke.

**Mandy:** Couldn't do that. No, definitely wouldn't fancy that.

There are several variations of the coca-cola trick, but it essentially involves a sex worker taking a glass bottle full of coke, standing on her head and emptying the bottle into her vagina, standing back up and dancing for a bit, before standing on her head again and emptying the coke back out into a glass or the same bottle. Mandy's disgust at the thought of drinking this tainted glass of coke was evident, not only from what she said, but the look on her face- her nose wrinkled, her mouth puckered, her eyebrows frowned. Her whole body told the story of her disgust- she shook her head, looked away, shuddered. Later in the interview I ask her about her interactions with the sex workers that she's met at the bars:

**Mandy:** It's alright being friendly, yes, but it gets a bit too much. In that first Go Go bar it was getting too much. I thought, 'Oh no, I can't handle this.' You were virtually jumped on, weren't you?

**Laura:** Yeah!

**Interviewer:** What is it about it that?

**Mandy:** I don't know. They're just too full on, way too full on. As soon as you sit down they are there. They are very, very, very forward.

Mandy and Laura were a lesbian couple, and their anxiety about borders here may be influenced by their understanding of sexuality within this setting. However, the fact remains that Thai bodies become less friendly and more threatening as they come closer in the physical sphere. Miller suggests that being touched by an Other can elicit feelings of disgust: 'Touchings from this [Other] person will disgust if there are attempts at greater intimacy, and will disgust...if the touching is not a request for intimacy' (1997: 65). Mandy and her partner were both uncomfortable with the female sex workers who were 'too full on' and felt overwhelmed by these particular sex workers who entered into their space uninvited.

An interview with Christina suggests that even visual engagements that cross boundaries can be uncomfortable. I asked her about her experiences with sex workers in Bangla Road:

**Christina:** ...it's a different culture I think. I think I was really disturbed walking down Bangla road and this guy had this photo album with this spread-legged girl and he went, in my face, I didn't have any option really, he just shoved it in my face and I was oh my goodness that was so gross.

Christina was quite upset about the visual confrontation she had with a photographic image of the Other, yet despite being upset by the sexual scenes she was frequently confronted by on Bangla Road, visited this space almost every night of her holiday.

For Mandy and Laura, and for Christina, who clearly demonstrate their discomfort at being subject to physical or visual 'violation', there must be a reason why, despite this disgust related to the Other, they continue to go back every evening to the same spaces.

This sense of being threatened by the Others who somehow manage to invade personal space raises questions about the nature of bodily boundaries. Kristeva (2003) notes the importance of boundary maintenance in relation to abjection and argues that disruptions to the status quo shape and mold the relationship between whole/object bodies: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite...' (2003: 391). So it is not that the prostitute body is unclean or unhealthy that allows for its abject position, but rather that sex workers' bodies disrupt the 'natural' order. Wolff (2003) suggests that '...the body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules and boundaries concerning bodily behavior can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies' (2003:416).

As bodies become 'civilized', they are more carefully watched and controlled, but the uncontrollable 'grotesque' body defies this civilizing process. Wolff argues that this relates specifically to gendered bodies. She draws on Russo who suggests that '...women and their bodies, certain bodies, in relation to public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive- dangerous and in danger' (Russo in Wolff, 2003:418). Prostitutes' bodies are sexually transgressive, and Thai women's bodies represent the exotic/racial Other; Thai sex workers are doubly positioned as grotesque and are understood by some western women as both 'dangerous and in danger'. The threat that these dangerous, grotesque, Other bodies pose means that the process of controlling also works to delimit, and perhaps deny Thai sex workers any subjectivity.

Ahmed argues that some bodies come to inhabit the 'unlivable' zones of social life and are denied any real subjectivity while other bodies are able to move freely and without constraint.

She notes:

The marking out of the border which defines the subject- the constitutive outside- is the condition of possibility for the subject, the process through which it can come into being...The subject who can act and move in the world with ease- the white, masculine, heterosexual subject- does so through expelling those other beings from this zone of the living' (Ahmed, 2000:52).

Kristeva's arguments on the nature of abjection provide a critical examination of 'grotesque bodies'. Drawing on Lacanian theories on the development of identity, Kristeva's arguments center on the notion of the abject as liminal. Ahmed notes that 'The abject relates to what is revolting, to what threatens the boundaries of both thought and identity' (2000:51). In this sense, then, the Thai body, the grotesque body, occupies a liminal space and sits in opposition to the western women's bodies. Kristeva notes that 'The abject has only one quality of the object- and of being opposed to *I*' (Kristeva, 2003:389 original emphasis).

## Conclusion

Nichols argues that our emotional, embodied response to what we see can sometimes block our cognitive understanding of these images:

Sometimes bodily experience exceeds intellectual understanding. Cognitive processing and bodily experience produce contradictory responses that disorient the mind. Visceral reactions occur that are uncontained by the descriptive or explanatory grid utilized by a given film (1994: 69).

Nichols is talking here about reactions to ethnographic films, but reactions to ethnographic displays of the Other that occur in person in the flesh, have the potential to render the viewer in the same position. He writes about the reactions of students who were asked to watch an ethnographic film about *The Nuer* tribe, arguing that their emotional response to watching these Other people worked to block 'more elaborate readings of the film, leaving the students feeling boredom, disgust, or awe. This pattern recalls Mulvey's comment that patterns of identification, or scopophilia, have their own aims which create the eroticized imagined world needed to support the subjects' image of him- or herself, aims which make a mockery of empirical objectivity (1994:70).

These feelings of disgust, entertainment, awe- these visceral reactions to the sex industry - all suggest that some of these women were impacted by what they saw, by the images they witnessed as part of their visit to Patpong, to a go-go bar, or to a ping pong show. This chapter has focused on these emotions as the gaps and silences in women's narratives have been explored. Psychoanalysis offers a way here of exploring the unconscious motivations of women to see this type of entertainment and, more than this, suggests that these motivations to see exoticized/eroticized Others are couched in unequal relations of power.

In psychoanalysis women are generally not situated as voyeurs, as vision is associated with both power and the phallus- and women lack both. But in Thailand, some women do look. They go to the sex industry as part of their tourist experience- they are there, they are looking, and they talk about the dynamics of looking as part of this tourist scenario. Some psychoanalysts have noted that sadism is wrapped up in the processes of looking, and some suggest that women are capable of enacting this gaze. Film theory draws on elements of psychoanalytic theory and has gone some way to creating a feminist understanding of female spectatorship/the female gaze. But neither psychoanalysis nor traditional feminist film theory completely gets to grips to why western women would want to look at Other women, nor have they gone far enough to include race as a category of analysis.

Tourism literature does grapple with this idea of the Other and the tourist gaze is part of an analytic framework that recognizes the importance of race as they relates to the power of looking. However, here gender/sexuality is the excluded category of analysis- and even feminist tourism theory does not recognize the gendered aspects of the gaze. However, some women are operating a female gaze here, and employing their looking relations to enact their power over the lesser, abject Others they come into contact with (or for that matter, do not come into contact with).

Just as western women in the colonial era employed a particular type of power- a different type of power than they had had in their 'normal' lives- and used this to gaze upon and sketch out the 'curious natives' they encountered, so too do modern western women, armed with financial, social, political, and racial power, gaze upon the curious female natives that are so emblematic of Thailand. The sex industry has been clearly pointed out as a marker of Thainess, with female sex workers the obvious object of the gaze, and some western women use their various capitals to engage voyeuristically with the sex industry.

The voyeuristic gaze is another example of the power that western women have in the particular space of Thailand, which we have seen employed in different ways in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. The concluding chapter will consider these various power mechanisms that enable western women to visit these sexualized and spaces and that encourage an uneven relationship with the Thai women they encounter there. Chapter Seven will posit that these various modes of power available to female tourists, and indeed the very structures of tourism, result in the oppression of Other women and sustain racialized inequalities.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapters of the thesis, I have argued that western women engage with a variety of sexualized spaces and places in Thailand as part of their tourist experience. I have suggested that these interactions are based upon a complex set of touristic practices and power relations that serve to inscribe Thai sex workers as Other.

Chapter Three began by asking the questions:

- How has the sex tourist industry become entrenched in Thailand?
- How are the sexualized discourses around Thailand sustained and promoted by the tourist industry?

This chapter argued that historical and social contexts have worked to entrench the sex industry in Thailand, and these contexts have created a sexualized discourse around Thailand, where Thai Others (and in particular, Thai women) have come to be seen as sexualized and eroticized. These discourses can be seen in popular cultural materials (books, films, television shows) and into various tourism literatures (guidebooks, cultural guides, and local guide magazines) and have helped to position Thailand as a sexualized destination. The place-myth of Thailand as a 'sex tourist' locale has been proliferated by these various cultural and touristic scripts, and the sex industry is presented (particularly in travel guides) as a normalized tourist experience. However, while it is clear that tourists might receive these kinds of sexualized images from various sources, the important questions were whether western women identified with these discourses, and whether they actually visited the sex industry as part of a normal tourist experience.

As such, Chapter Four began by asking the questions:

- Do western women tourists interact with and consume the sex industry?
- How do they understand and makes sense of these interactions?

This chapter opened with observation and survey data that placed western women in sexualized spaces, and highlighted their knowledge of the sexual nature of Thailand. It was suggested that some tourists are indeed influenced by this understanding of Thailand as a sexual space, and their desire to explore and interact with sexualized venues/areas is based on the assumption that this is an ‘authentic’ tourist experience that one should have while in Thailand. Women who had visited the shows had a complicated understanding of these experiences, in that they perceived the shows to be something any or all tourists (rather than just sex tourists do), but some of them also understood this interaction with sex shows or red lights areas as risky or adventurous. Women’s definition of an authentic experience in Thailand was not necessarily based on having an authentic interaction with an exotic Other, but rather was based on a more existential form of authenticity (Wang,1999), where a key concern for many women was in shaping their tourist identity and accruing cultural capital based on their travel experiences.

Chapter Five continued this examination of women’s engagement with sexual spaces, and asked:

- How do western women understand their presence at the shows in relation to other tourists who also occupy these spaces?
- How do western women position themselves in relation to the Thai sex workers they encounter?

This chapter suggested that women's own understanding of their role within the sex tourist environment was based upon their understandings of the Others who occupy these spaces. Their position on the western men who visit sexual shows varied depending on their level of interaction with these men. Many of the women visited a sexual show with a male friend, partner, or family member. They understood these particular men to be uninterested in the sexual aspects of the show, and generally women constructed these male compatriots as co-observers. They were not considered deviant. However, the Other men who visited these spaces on their own or engaged with sex workers were considered 'disgusting' by many of the female participants. A group dynamic worked here to help women resolve their own interactions in these spaces, and to ensure that their own engagements were not construed as sexual. As well, women's interactions with the sex workers they came across vacillated between pity and concern to annoyance and derision. The importance of maintaining one's social status was stressed here, and accomplished this by drawing on essentialized sexual scripts to enact a desexualized femininity. Western women situated themselves in a hierarchical framework where they understood themselves to be different to the sexualized Others they come across.

There was a good deal of confusion from western women about how to interpret their own experiences, however women were generally convinced that their sexual interactions were neither active, nor sexually motivated. To work through some of these confusions, and try to understand women's visual interactions more fully, Chapter Six began by asking:

- Are women's visual interactions with the sex industry really passive?
- How does power operate in their visual consumption of the Other?

This chapter used psychoanalysis to explore the gaps in women's narratives about the sex industry, and also problematized women's visual engagement with these sexual spaces. In this chapter psychoanalysis was used as a tool to explore the underlying reasons that women may

avoid critically reflecting upon their engagement with the sex industry. Psychoanalytic thought points us to the various ways that looking/watching are wrapped up in power relations, and how the act of looking in some contexts is potentially active and sexual, sadistic and hostile. The chapter questioned to what extent women were engaged in power relations as part of this looking process, and drew on post-colonial and film theory to suggest that Thai Others are often situated as lesser/object/disgusting.

This thesis has argued that western women tourists do interact with sexualized spaces in Thailand, but they do this as part of a 'normal tourist experience', rather than seeing this action as sexual or active. They draw on various forms of capital to facilitate their entry, and they employ a complex set of social and power relations to position themselves in opposition to the sexual Others (male sex tourists and female sex workers) that they encounter. However, I have argued that these relations are neither innocent, nor passive, and that these complicated renderings of sexualized Others work to reinforce racial prejudices. As such, it is important to think through the interactions of women with the sexualized zones. This chapter will conclude the thesis by asking:

- What are the implications of women's interactions with the sex industry in Thailand for theoretical understandings of the gendered practices of tourism/sex tourism?

To answer this question, I will argue firstly that tourism and sex tourism processes are not discrete, and further that all tourism processes help produce inequalities. I will argue that the social and power relations that western women employ in order to access these spaces is problematic, and that any set of relations that rely on the consumption of difference as a starting point serve to *reinscribe* difference – at the expense of the Thai sex workers who are rendered Other as part of this process. A cultural imperialism is at work here, one that helps to normalize women's entrée into spaces that would normally be off-limits for them, and allows

them to visual consume Thai women while at the same time they label/delimit them within a racist framework.

I will conclude this thesis by offering a number of suggestions for how to take this work forward. This thesis has only started to draw out some of the issues associated with women's interactions with sexual zones – more work needs to be done to understand gendered tourist experiences, and to think through some of the inequalities that emerge as part of tourist/sex tourist practices more generally.

### **Problematizing Tourism/Sex Tourism Processes**

As Chapter One has argued, the sex industry in Thailand has the potential to exploit and make vulnerable women working in the sex industry. The illicit nature of the industry puts Thai women at a disadvantage, as they have to negotiate a complex set of legal and social relations that work to marginalize them. The tourism-oriented sex industry reinforces uneven power relationships, as western men (and women) have access to various cultural, social, and economic capitals that Thai sex workers do not. However, these unequal relationships between western tourists and Thai Others is also prevalent in wider tourism practices, where consumer processes create a desire for difference and tourism processes result in the exploitation of local people. The ways in which western women engage with sex tourism, and importantly the ways in which they understand Thai culture within this sexual framework (even if they do not actively seek out or explore the sex industry), create a system whereby Thai people often become objectified.

However, it is worth mentioning that western men in Thailand also work to disavow their interactions with the sex industry as problematic. The male tourists in Gunther (1998) suggest that they are not 'real' sex tourists because they 'did not intend to have sex with a local woman', did not restrict their holiday 'to having sex with local women', nor did they see their

interaction as based on a financial exchange (Gunther, 1998: 72-73). This focus on financial exchange is an essential part of how some western men understand their sexual relationships with local women, as the absence of payment suggests that these sexual relations are mutual, friendly, and equitable. The nebulous nature of sex tourism in Thailand makes sexual interactions somehow more ambiguous than they might be in a western context, and allows for western men who are engaging in sexual relationships with local women to reconstruct these relationships in more 'romantic' terms<sup>34</sup>. That does not, however, mean that there is a clear difference between 'romance' tourism and 'sex' tourism (Gunther, 1998), nor does it mean these relationships are truly equal. However, the way that 'sex tourism' is represented and the image of the 'sex tourist' hides the nature of these more ambiguous interactions. So too does it mask the visual interactions of western tourists (male and female) in these spaces. Whatever tourists subjectively think about their own experiences and their interactions with these spaces, there is little doubt that these types of interactions help reproduce inequalities, and help to sustain the structures that support tourism/sex tourism, and reinforce a market that relies on an unprotected, stigmatized, and potentially vulnerable group of people.

### **Tourism as a Form of Oppression**

The very structures of tourism are part of this oppressive process. Iris Marion Young, in her work in oppression, suggests that the way groups are structured and the way group identities are configured creates a system of inequality:

Oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions...oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions (Young, 1990:41).

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<sup>34</sup> This is true in other national contexts as well. See Brennan (2004) Sanchez Taylor (2000), or O'Connell Davidson (1996) for details on more nebulous sexual exchanges in the Caribbean, for example.

The point Young makes here is that it is not necessary to strive to oppress in order to iterate oppressive structures. It is doubtful whether the western women I spoke with would understand their interactions with Thai Others as oppressive, neither would (or did) they see their interactions with the sex industry as problematic. It is important to make clear here that it is not only individual tourists that create the uneven and unequal relationships, but rather the structures of tourism itself. As we have seen in Chapter Five, the social nature of tourism processes helps to engender a group dynamic that positions Thai people as Other, and male sex tourists as Other. Social groups are 'collective[s] of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life...a group only exists in relation to at least one other group' (Young, 1990:41).

In this tourist context, when it can be argued that a key aim of tourism is to consume difference, tourists are able to form a particular social group based on their visual exploration of spaces, their similar western background, and their similar desire to consume the exotic. Thai people become the Others in this sense, differentiated by their cultural norms and practices, and their way of life. Furthermore, the visibility of sex workers positions them as not only different, but reinforces the sense of their group identity. Many women understood 'Thai culture' as more open and natural about sex, and this reveals something of this group dynamic, as their understanding of Thai sex workers as Other work to help them classify and identify themselves 'as belonging to a certain social group...with a certain social status' (Young, 1990: 44). In fact, it is not even necessary for tourists to consciously identify themselves as a group in order for them to see themselves as separate to or other from an Other group. However, these group identities are problematic, Young argues, in that they form the basis for oppression: 'Oppression...is something that happens to people when they are classified in groups. Because others identify them as a group, they are excluded and despised' (1990:47).

The way that some western women understand their interactions with sex workers and the way that they manage their interactions with these sexualized Others seems to reinforce and inscribe difference, and has the potential to produce boundaries which divide western women from these Other women. Miller notes that 'Disgust, along with contempt, as well as other emotions in various settings, recognizes and maintains difference. Disgust helps define boundaries between us and them, me and you. It helps prevent our way from being subsumed into their way' (Miller, 1997: 50). Further,

...disgust inheres in the relationship between the disgusted and the object of disgust. Further...disgust is bound up with identity: part of who we are relies on not being (or liking) the disgusting object. In other words, disgust works to "push away" others, and, in the process, establish one's own identity as non-disgusting (Lawler, 2008:141).

The group processes of tourism help to define who is subject and who is object, who is clean and who is dirty, who is same and who is different, who has power and who is oppressed.

Young argues that the way to do away with this type of oppression is not to get rid of difference but rather to support 'institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression' (Young, 1990:47). Oppression can operate in a number of different guises, including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. In this case of tourism in Thailand, cultural imperialism is the most relevant category of oppression:

To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as Other. Cultural imperialism

involves the universalization of a dominant group's experiences and culture, and its establishment as the norm (Young, 1990:59).

In this sense, cultural imperialism works to normalize the experience of the dominant group, rendering the differences seen in these Others as 'lack and negation' (McClintock, 1995:59). These lacking, negated Others are seen as deviant, abnormal, outsiders. They become stereotyped and placed and, problematically, 'the dominant culture's stereotyped and inferiorized images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the extent that they are forced to react to the behavior of others influenced by those images' (Young, 1990: 59-60).

The politics of visibility is essential to this process of inferiorization, and Young argues that 'cultural imperialism involves the paradox of experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different' (Young, 1990:60). These Others, these watched, placed, managed Others, are interpreted through the lenses of stereotypes and marginalization, and their displayed bodies become the fixed objects through which this process takes shapes. Casper and Moore argue that in the modern world 'Bodies are made visible and seen- or watched' (2009:1). We are trained to 'visually process and meticulously read bodies- our own and others- for social cues about love, beauty, status, and identity (2009:1). The way sex workers' bodies are visually processed helps to position them as Other. Indeed the body of the sex worker in Thailand becomes hyper-visible in the tourist context. The sex industry is positioned as a site/sight for tourism spectatorship, and the bodies of Other sex workers become the focus of this public, visual engagement: '...some bodies are public and visually dissected while others are vulnerable to erasure and marginalization' (Casper and Moore, 2009:9) The politics of visibility comes to occupy an important component in tourism/sex tourism processes, if only because it creates hierarchies where some bodies are given a lower status and are seen as dangerous, as disgusting, as Other

(Douglas, 1966). Miller suggests that the disgust we feel for Others is based on our own notion of superiority over these dangerous, impure people:

Disgust is a recognition of danger to our purity. But it is more...disgust does not do its moral work so as to allow us unambivalent pleasure in our relative moral superiority to the disgusting other. Disgust admits our own vulnerability and compromise even as it constitutes an assertion of superiority (Miller, 1997: 204).

The politics of watching and enacting the gaze in sexualized settings works to position sex workers and 'sex tourists' as (disgusting) objects of the gaze and western women as active consumers of the sex industry. The processes of engaging with the sex industry become particularly problematic when we consider how this visual consumption allows western women to retain their status as socially higher vis-à-vis the Others they are visually consuming, as the resulting impact of these engagements creates a scenario where Thai people become stereotyped and objectified. The next section will explore essentialist understandings of female sexuality that have helped inform interpretations of western women in sex tourist settings as passive (rather than active) and kept them invisible in these sexualized spaces.

### **Enforcing Essentialist Tropes**

This thesis began by suggesting that analyses of sex tourism were often based on essentialist readings of male and female sexuality, with 'female sex tourists' understood as romance seekers, or even as exploited victims (rather than exploiters themselves). This thesis has presented evidence that suggests essentialist understandings of male and female sexuality help to inform interpretations of prostitution and sex tourism where male sexuality is seen as powerful and overwhelming and female sexuality is seen as less potent; these ideas feeds into social understandings about what drives sexual desires and what defines sexual behavior.

Simon and Gagnon (1999) suggest that the sexual scripts that govern gender-appropriate behaviors reinforce particular behaviors for men and women, as we buy into social ideas about sexuality and what's 'ok' for a woman to do sexually, or more often than not what's not 'ok'.

This is perhaps part of the reason so many articles on sex tourism fail to provide a gendered analysis of the sexual interactions of 'sex tourists', or those that focus on female 'sex tourism' work to situate these engagements as innocent/romantic compared to similar behaviors enacted by male tourists. Much of the research that has focused on the visual aspects of sexual tourism more often than not assume that these particular spaces/places and zones are built for and sustained by men (Suren and Steifvater, 1998; Ryan and Martin, 2001; Wonders and Michalowski, 2001), or ignore the presence of women in those zones as if they are somehow irrelevant. However, tourist practices in Thailand suggest that some women can and do access these sexual sites/sights as part of their own tourist experience, and what is more they work to build the idea that these types of venues/spaces are places that female tourists *should* go as part of their trip to Thailand. While many women do not adhere to any kind of sexual script when describing their desire to interact with these spaces, the shows they are watching are sexual, or at the very least have a high density of 'sexual cues' (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). The social understandings of female sexuality as passive work to shape sexual scripts in such a way that it becomes difficult for women to admit to sexual arousal, even if that is what they feel. Understanding the pressure that they feel to deny their own sexual desire conflicts with women's desire to interact with these sexual zones, and more work needs to be done to make sense of this gap.

Some research suggests that women in western cities are actively excluded from attending sexual venues in western cities, particularly those that feature female sex workers (Frank, 2003; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008) but the presence of western women in sexual spaces in these four Thai cities has a significance for our understanding of the particular space of

Thailand. Hubbard et al (2008) argue that more emphasis needs to be placed on spaces/places where commercially sexual activity takes place, 'because their location and visibility within the urban landscape is highly revealing of the sexual values that dominate in particular contexts' (2008:1). In the case of Thailand, the prevalence of tourist-oriented sexual spaces certainly says something about Thai values, but it says just as much about western values, as western tourists contribute to its international promotion, and make these venues so commercially viable.

Understanding the processes that western women engage in when they watch these sexual, erotic displays of Other women, when they visually consume sexual spaces and the Others that inhabit these tourist environs, are complicated; there is no one theoretical position that can adequately explain what is going on here, and this thesis has turned to a number of different areas to try to thrash out how we might start to explain women's desire to explore these places. What is clear is that there is a process of dis-identification going on here, and some western women situate their subject positions in ways that serve to objectify the Other, and at the same time render the Other as lesser, as object, as disgusting, and as 'not me'.

The way that women's desires have been constructed, and the way that women's sexuality has been understood (within tourism/sex tourism literature and within psychoanalytic theory), provides a social understanding of female sexuality as passive/inactive. For theorists like Pruitt and LaFont (1995) and Jeffreys (2003), women tourists who engage in sexual relationships with foreign men are engaging in a type of romantic activity where they are still held to the gendered scripts that are available to them in a western context. These women are essentialized as the passive victims of a globalized gender hierarchy, where even as they operate social, political, and economic capital, they are doomed to fall into the same traps that are set for them in their own countries. The scant attention that has been paid to the role of women tourists in these settings is problematic, as commentators have been able to avoid difficult questions. Feminist academics that suggest women are always and ever victims of

patriarchy have been able to avoid the painful issues that arise when one set of women is able to attain power and privilege at the expense of Other women.

By addressing the ways in which western women have been rendered invisible in these spaces, I hope to bring the presence of women in these sexualized zones to the fore. The difficult realities of tourism and sex tourism are made visible here, and I hope that the questions that have often been sidestepped in analyses of sexual tourism, especially female sex tourism, can start to be redressed.

As well, moving the focus of the interaction away from sexual relationships and onto a more complicated form of sexualized tourism allows for a more considered evaluation of tourist/host relationships. Arguments around power and gender difference become more complicated when the objects of women's tourist desire are Other women. The western women interviewed here are not visiting ping pong shows and cabaret shows for 'romance' purposes, neither are they engaging in traditional gendered scripts by visiting these sexualized spaces and places. It is true that most women did not feel empowered enough to visit these types of spaces on their own, but neither did they traipse along at the behest of their male partners and empathize with the Thai sex workers that there put on display. On the contrary, many women expressed an active desire to see and visit these spaces, and while they may have felt that in some ways these areas were still dedicated to the whims of male (sex) tourists, their understanding of the other tourist men who they often went with suggests they did not see *these particular* men as contributors to the sex industry, nor did they see themselves as impacting upon the Thai sex tourist trade.

However, women tourists' interactions do impact upon the sex industry. The way the sex industry is positioned in their narratives, the importance that many women give to their interactions and the way these 'adventures' are then shared with friends and relatives at home highlights the way that the place-myth of sexual Thailand is increasingly promoted by

tourists, and in this way helps to expand the importance of visiting sex tourists sites/sights to other prospective tourists. And as Wilson (2004) points out, Thai bars and sexual venues rely heavily upon selling drinks and entrance fees for their profits, and western women's entrance to these shows, and the drinks they buy while they are sitting/watching, contribute to the maintenance of the sex industry.

While the Tourism Authority of Thailand may suggest that they are interested in attracting more women to help stave off the image of Thailand as a 'sex tourist paradise' (Bowes, 2004) women tourists are interested in visiting the sex industry and exploring sexualized spaces as part of a Thai experience. It does not seem that women are put off by the sex industry, but rather they are mostly intrigued by it, and some of these women satisfy their curiosity about the sex industry and visit any number of sexual shows as part of their visit to Thailand. In order to realistically consider the role of sex tourism in larger policy debates, an informed investigation aimed at understanding the appeal of sexual spaces to all tourists must be undertaken. It is not enough to assume that women do not want to see or explore these sites, to buy into gendered assumptions about what women tourists might want to consume as part of their tourist activities; it is necessary to measure the impacts of all tourists, male and female, on the sustenance of the sex industry, and to propose realistic mechanisms for shifting the focus away from the Thai tourist sex trade, to more culturally productive forms of tourism. Sustainable tourism has started to acknowledge that sustainable travel must include elements of social responsibility, (including a focus on sex work and migration) but this development is still in its infancy and there needs to be more specific focus on social problems - as opposed to environmental issues (Tepelus, 2008).

However, even with a shift towards more productive forms of tourism, the larger problem remains: tourism processes, and indeed these visual sex tourism processes, are indicative of the wider inequalities that exist globally, and that allow tourism in the 'developing' world to continue to thrive. While groups like Tourism Concern and Responsible Travel are trying to

create a more ethical style of travel, where tourists consider the impact of their interactions with local communities, the problem lies not in making travel more ethical, but in the principles that drive and motivate some tourists to travel in the first place: the desire for difference, the desire for the Other. Tourism processes are predicated upon the notion of difference, and tourist gazes are structured around consuming difference (Urry, 2002; Crang, 2007; Wearing et al, 2010). The construction of the Other as exotic, as erotic, as naturally sexual, becomes part and parcel of the tourist experience of Thailand, reinforced by the discourses on Thai culture that exist in popular culture and in guidebooks. These discourses are partly to blame for encouraging an image of Thailand as a site for sexual adventure, yet the desire for the exotic, erotic Other has for so long been a part of the way westerners engage with Other places (as colonizers, as missionaries, as tourists) that to escape this heritage becomes very difficult.

### **Escaping Boundaries or Imprisoning Others?**

The way the space of the sex industry is understood has an impact on the ways in which western women see themselves within a western society. Shields notes that: ‘Over time, spatial practices, the habitual routines of “place ballets”, are concretized in the built environment and sedimented in the landscape’ (1991:53). As these spaces become physically embedded in the landscape, this ‘place ballet’ also serves to iterate the function and form of these particular sites, so that the sex industry becomes not only physically entrenched in Thailand, but becomes mentally ingrained in the minds of (western) tourists as part of the scenery, as part of the social space. This iterative process becomes mentally entrenched and the Thai sex industry is rendered ‘normal’ and ‘touristic’ because it has already been substantively imagined and positioned as such.

If we are to believe authors who suggest that travel can offer (western) women freedom and empowerment, or even that travel offers women a space for resisting cultural and gendered

norms (Harris and Wilson, 2007), we need to ask at what cost does this empowerment come? If women travelers- even those who might be termed ‘cultural travelers’ or ‘independent travelers’ - are accessing sexual spaces as part of a tourist experience, and consuming the bodies of Thai Others in these sexualized zones, than perhaps this heterotopic view of women and travel needs to be reexamined. Western women may be escaping gendered boundaries that might normally constrain their behaviors at home, but if they are doing this at the expense of Other women then perhaps a new analysis of gendered tourism practices, one that deconstructs notions of a universal femininity, needs to be developed.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Understanding gendered tourism processes requires a complex understanding of how gender sits in relation to other formative identities. The women who participated in this study came from a variety of backgrounds, nationalities, ages, and travel situations, all of which may have impacted their engagement with particular spaces/zones. Exploring the impression of a single group, perhaps backpackers or package tourists, younger tourists or older tourists, solo travelers or group travelers, may give more insight into the particular motivations of tourists, and the way tourist identities change or shift depending on a particular context/situation. Exploring the impressions of non-western women might also be relevant here, especially as there is evidence that suggests tourists from other Asian countries to Thailand are likely to increase over the next few years (Song et al, 2003). Existing research on the sexual behaviors of Japanese women in Thailand (Vorakitphokatorn et al, 1994) means that exploring the interactions of non-western tourists in these spaces would also add depth to the current theoretical debates on tourism and sex tourism practices. Looking at different types of traveler mode and different national backgrounds would also add important dimensions to a study of gendered tourism practices.

This research focused exclusively on western women's engagements with sexual spaces in Thailand. Some women made a clear distinction between the normal tourist men who were watching, and those 'sex tourist' men who were somehow seen as more active. Although this distinction seems to be based on personal intuition, rather than a clear understanding of who was a real sex tourist and who was not, there is a need to investigate the role of the men who occupy these spaces, and examine their motivations to see and explore sexual shows. Further research that explores the understandings of western male tourists would work to highlight the differences and similarities between male and female tourists in these spaces, and as such would add to both gendered understandings of tourism and sex tourism processes.

The gender tourism practices explored in this thesis were all done with tourists in situ. However, it would be useful to explore women's thoughts and understandings of their interactions with the sex industry after their return home as it is possible being away from the tourist setting may precipitate a more critical reflection. The way that tourists process their experiences after leaving the tourist setting would perhaps be more critically engaged than whilst they are still in the midst of processing their journey, and engaging with women at some point after their return could lead to richer data.

This thesis looked at gender *tourism* processes, however there were some women who acknowledged that they accessed sexualized entertainment in their home countries. This suggests that it might be worth exploring how the sexualization of culture is at work in women's desires to visit sexualized zone. Further research on the behaviors of women in relation to sexual shows in their own countries would highlight the differences (and similarities) in the way women tourists here have seen women in the sex industry (here as Thai/non-western, as sexual/aggressive and passive/victims) and the way that they understand sex workers from their own country or place of origin. As well, women's touristic interactions with the tourist-oriented sex industry in other western cities, Amsterdam or London, would provide a useful insight into the ways in which interactions with these sites/sights are based

on notions of difference/otherness in different contexts. It would also help to unravel the ways that race/ethnicity/exoticization figures into their interpretations of the Others they encounter in Thailand.

Finally, the ethnographic approach used for this research allowed for a relatively long period of time in the field. This was necessary because there was little data about the nature or the actual scale of the sex industry in the fieldwork sites. It would be useful to conduct a comprehensive mapping exercise to assess the size and scale of the tourist-oriented sex sector, which would provide important information about the growth of these sexual markets. Even mapping ping pong shows would provide useful evidence about the location of sexual venues. For example several hotel owners on Khao San Road told me that a ping pong show was due to open in the summer/autumn of 2008. A ping pong show in this 'counter-cultural' area would suggest that either Khao San is appealing to more 'sex tourists', or that more 'normal' tourists are interested in accessing the sex show. A more in-depth analysis of the logistic arrangements of the Thai sex tourism trade would be an important addition to the literature.

### **A Final Thought**

This thesis started with my own narrative about my engagement with the sexual spaces of Thailand, and my question of how was it I could find the shows so horrible and disturbing, and yet so many of the female tourists in these spaces seemed to have a great time. The answer to this question is much more complicated than it might appear. Some women did find the shows entertaining or hilarious, some of them found it disturbing and horrible, some did not know what to think- but many women were compelled by the sex industry and intrigued by it. Whether or not they ever decided to actually visit a sex tourist site/sight, the sex industry in Thailand was and is captivating, and for all the wrong reasons. While this thesis has started to explore some of the problems associated with visiting sex tourist sites/sights, a more polemic strategy needs to be employed to problematize popular culture renditions of

Thai people as sexual/exotic/erotic, to convey to tourists the roles that they play in sustaining the sex industry (whether intentional or not) and to de-touristize the sex industry in Thailand. Furthermore, a more critical analysis of tourism processes is needed, as the undercurrent of power that guides and shapes women's desire to see these sexual Others comes from the same source that pushes tourists to consume difference/the exotic/the erotic. Tourism and sex tourism are two sides of the same coin, where tourist Others become the objectified objects of the consuming and powerful tourist gaze.

## Appendix I: Survey

### Travels in Thailand: A Questionnaire

This survey is part of an Economics and Social Research Council funded research project being undertaken for the completion of PhD at the University of Nottingham.

The survey poses questions about women's attitudes towards tourism in Southeast Asia, and some of the questions will explore women's opinions about the sex industry in Thailand. The questionnaire will take 10-15 minutes to complete. When you have finished place the questionnaire in the envelope provided and seal. This will ensure that your responses remain anonymous if you wish. There is an opportunity for you to provide your contact details. Please do not fill in this section if you want your responses to be anonymized.

**The questionnaire is completely anonymous and confidential.**

If you provide contact details these will only be used to get in touch for future research, not for identification purposes.

Many thanks for your valuable contribution to this research.

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***About your Holiday***

1. What is the main purpose of your visit to Thailand?

- Business
- Pleasure/Vacation
- Visiting friends/family
- Live here permanently
- Other (please fill in) \_\_\_\_\_

2. Who are you traveling with?

- Alone
- With my partner (boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife etc.)
- With my family
- With my female friends
- With my male and female friends
- With my male friends
- With my work colleagues
- Other (please fill in) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Did you organize travel independently, or are you on a package holiday?

- Independently
- Package Holiday
- Not applicable

4. How long have you been in Thailand?

- Less than a week
- Less than 2 weeks
- More than 2 weeks

***About You***

5. Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Country of residence: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Race

- White       Black       Asian       Mixed Race
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Age:

- 18-24                       25-40
- 41-60                       61 or over

9. Sexual Orientation:  Straight       Gay     Bisexual       Other

10. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Can you give a rough idea of your salary?: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Marital/civil partnership status: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Number of children: \_\_\_\_\_

14. Highest educational qualification: \_\_\_\_\_

***About Nightlife in Thailand***

15. Thinking about evenings out, have you done any of the following during your stay in Thailand? (please tick all appropriate boxes)

	<b>I have visited</b>	<b>I'd like to visit</b>	<b>I don't want to visit</b>	<b>I've never heard of it</b>
Bar/Pub				
Disco/Nightclub				
A Red Light Area				
A Brothel				
Go-Go Bar with female dancers				
Go-Go Bar with male dancers				
A 'Ping-Pong' Show/Sex Show				
A 'Lady-Boy' Show				
A Male Striptease				

16. What types of establishments do you consider to be part of the sex industry?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Normal bars       | <input type="checkbox"/> Hotels              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pool halls        | <input type="checkbox"/> Brothels            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go-go bars        | <input type="checkbox"/> Ping pong/sex shows |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lady-boy cabarets | <input type="checkbox"/> Male strip clubs    |

17. Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
I expected there to be a lot of prostitution in Thailand					
There is more prostitution here than I expected					
Prostitution seems to be a normal part of Thai culture					

***About Female Prostitutes in Thailand***

18. Thinking about female Thai prostitutes, please answer the following:

- I've not seen any prostitutes in Thailand
- I've seen prostitutes but I haven't talked to any of them
- I've had a chat with one or more female prostitutes

19. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Talking to prostitutes is the good way to have an authentic experience in Thailand.					
I'd never have a chance to speak to prostitutes like this back home.					
It was fascinating talking to women working as prostitutes.					
I'll definitely tell my friends that I was chatting to a prostitute.					
I felt uncomfortable talking to prostitutes because I worry that I'm exploiting them.					

20. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
I feel sorry for women working in prostitution.					
The women working as prostitutes need to be rescued.					
In such a poor country prostitution is the best way for women to make money.					

***About Tourist Men in Thailand***

21. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Western men who buy sex in Thailand are exploiting women.					
I'd be disgusted if any of my male friends went to a prostitute.					
Men are more sexual than women so it's natural that they use prostitutes.					
In this day and age buying sex is fine as long as both parties are consenting adults.					

22. For the following statements, please tick all answers that you agree with:

- Buy sex because it's so cheap
- Are just enjoying themselves and having a good time
- Do what's normal for men who visit Thailand to do
- Are disgusting and pathetic
- Are too old and ugly to get women back home
- Like Thai women because they are more submissive than western women

***About Lady Boys in Thailand***

23. Have you seen any "lady boys" in Thailand?

- Yes  No (If not, please go to question 27)

24. If yes, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
I was amazed at how real they looked- you couldn't tell some of them were men.					
Cross dressing an authentic part of Thai culture.					
I felt sorry for them because in a way they have to sell themselves just like female prostitutes.					
Thai men are more feminine than men at home					
I was almost annoyed with them because they're more beautiful than most real women are.					

25. Have you been to a lady boy cabaret show in Thailand?

- Yes  No

26. If yes, who did you first go with?

- Alone

- With my partner (boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife etc.)
- With my family group
- With my female friends
- With my male and female friends
- With my male friends
- With work colleagues
- Did not go

***About your Holiday Photographs***

27. Which of the following have you taken photographs of on your holiday?

- Scenic landscapes/beaches
- Temples/Shrines
- Animals
- Thai children
- Markets/foodstalls
- Hill tribe people
- Lady boys
- Red light districts
- Female prostitutes
- Male prostitutes

***About your Experiences at Home***

28. Please answer the following question by ticking the appropriate box:

	Yes, often	Yes, a few times	No, never
I use pornography (magazine, dvds, erotic fiction, etc.).			
I have visited lap-dance clubs, hostess bars, or strip shows in my home country.			
I have been to brothels or red light areas in the place where I live.			
I have been to transvestite/cross dressing cabaret type shows in my home country.			

***About Sex Shows in Thailand***

29. Had you planned on going to see a sex show before you arrived in Thailand?

- Yes       No

30. Have you been to a ping pong show or sex show in Thailand

- Yes       No

31. Who did you first go with?

- Alone
- With my partner (boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife etc.)
- With my family group
- With my female friends
- With my male and female friends
- With my male friends
- With work colleagues
- Did not go

32. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Going to a ping pong/sex show is like paying for sex with a prostitute					
Going to a ping pong show is like looking at pornography					
Going to a ping pong show is like visiting a tourist attraction					

33. If you've been to a 'ping-pong' show, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements (If you haven't been to a show, please leave blank and continue to question 34):

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
I was disappointed because the women didn't look like they were enjoying it					
I found the show arousing; I was really turned on by it.					
I'd never go and see this kind of thing at home but here it's just what tourists do.					
I'd definitely tell my friends at home to go see it if they were to visit					
I like being in a place where normally only men can go.					
I went to the show because I like to experience all kinds of things					
I just went for a laugh but the men there watching the show were horrible					
I was uncomfortable being so close to Thai women who were doing those kinds of things					
The women doing the tricks are really skilled					

***About Holidays and Sex***

34. Thinking about this holiday in Thailand, please indicate whether you have had any of the following experiences

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Having a sexual encounter/holiday romance in Thailand was something I'd hoped would happen		
I've had a sexual encounter with another western tourists		
I've had a sexual encounter with a Thai person who is not a prostitute		
I've had a sexual encounter with a Thai male prostitute		
I've had a sexual encounter with a Thai female prostitute		

35. Thinking about this holiday in Thailand, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
I wear more revealing/sexy clothing in Thailand than I do at home.					
I feel sexier here than I do at home.					
I get more male attention here than I would in my own country.					
I feel like I'm competing with Thai women for men's attention.					
I feel less feminine in Thailand than I do at home.					
Thai women are so delicate and quiet that they make me feel big and loud in contrast to them.					

36. Thinking about Thailand more generally, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Western women are more independent than Thai women.					
Thai culture is more natural and					

open about sex than western culture.					
Thai men don't seem like 'real men' to me.					
Seeing how Thai women live makes me feel lucky to be a westerner					

37. Please write any further comments you have on the issues covered in this questionnaire here:

**If you would be willing to discuss your experiences in a 30-minute interview with the researcher please detach this sheet and leave your contact details (email or phone number), or else speak to the researcher when handing in the survey.**

**Contact details:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix II: Interview Schedule**

### **Main Question: What do you think of the sex industry in Thailand?**

Sub-questions:

- Had you anticipated there being prostitution in Thailand?
- Is there more or less prostitution than you thought? Does it upset you?
- Would it upset you to see this amount of prostitution in your own country?
- What types of establishments do you consider to be part of the sex industry [brothels, go-go bars, ping pong shows, lady-boy cabarets, male strip clubs, normal bars, hotels, pool halls, etc]?

### **Main Question: What do you think of the white men buying sex here?**

Sub-questions:

- Are western men exploiting Thai female sex workers?
- What would you think if a male friend or relative told you he'd bought sex in Thailand?
- Why do you think western men buy sex in Thailand?

### **Main Question: Do you think it's ok for women to buy sex?**

Sub-questions:

- Do you think that women would be more likely to buy sex here than they might at home?
- Have you seen any women tourists buying sex here? If so, from a man or a woman?
- Would you ever think about buying sex from a Thai man or woman?

### **Main Question: What do you think of Thai female prostitutes?**

Sub-questions:

- Do you think Thai prostitutes are taking advantage of Western men?
- Do you feel that Thai women working in the sex industry are victims?
- Do they need to be rescued by someone? If so, who is responsible for rescuing them?
- How does seeing Thai women working in the sex industry make you feel- does it make you angry or sad?
- What kinds of interactions have you had with sex workers, have you spoken with any of them? Did you feel differently about them after speaking to them?
- What were your first impressions of them when you saw them?

### **Main Question: Does being in Thailand make you more aware of your own privilege?**

Sub-questions:

- Does living in (America, Europe, Australia, etc) give you access to a privileged lifestyle?
- Do you think that Thai women would work as sex workers if there were other options?

### **Main Question: How did you find out about the sex industry?**

Sub-questions:

- Did friends or family tell you about the sex industry before you came?
- Did you read about the sex industry in your tourist guide?
- Would you tell your friends and family you had been to a show?

### **Main Question: What do you think of the lady boys in Thailand?**

Sub-questions:

- Have you been to a lady boy show?

- Have you seen lady boys in other spaces?
- Do you think they are feminine? Do you think Thai men in general are more feminine than western men?
- What do you think about gay prostitution? Are Thai men working in the sex industry victims?

**Main question: Have you been to a [sex show, go-go bar] in Thailand? Why or why not?**

Sub-questions:

- What are reasons for going/not going?
- Had you planned on going before you arrived in Thailand?
- If you did go, did you enjoy the experience? Did you find it funny or sad? Did you find it sexual?
- If not, what do you think it would be like?
- Would you tell friends to go if they came to Thailand?
- Who did you go with? Did your companions influence your decision to go?
- Have you been more than once?
- Do you think that you're contributing to the sex industry by going to sex shows or go-go bars?
- Would going to a sex show be considered buying a sexual encounter (why or why not)?

**Main Question: Have you been to a strip club in your own country? Why or why not?**

Sub-questions:

- What were reasons for going/not going?
- If you have been, did you enjoy the experience? Did you find it funny or sad? Did you find it sexual?
- If not, what do you think it would be like?
- Who did you go with? Did your companions influence your decision to go?
- Have you been more than once?
- How do strip clubs in England vary from sex shows here?

**Main Question: Do you think that watching sex shows or going to go-go bars is similar to using pornography?**

Sub-questions:

- Have you ever used pornography?
- Would you say that watching women perform sex acts is normally something that is exclusive to men?
- What does it feel like being able to watch Thai women in sex shows?
- Does it give you access to a space that is reserved almost exclusively for men?

**Main Question: Do you feel more feminine in Thailand than you do at home?**

Sub-questions:

- Do you dress differently here than you do at home?
- Do you dress differently than you do in other 'sunny' holiday locations?
- How does the way you dress reflect the way you feel about yourself- i.e. do you dress more 'sexy' when you want to feel feminine?
- How does the amount of skin on display make you think about the way you dress?
- What does the way Thai women dress say about them?

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