

# ‘When I was transgender’

Visibility, subjectivity, and queer aging in Indonesia

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## Abstract

This think piece reflects on the ways in which the category ‘transgender’ is used by *waria* – Indonesia’s ‘national transvestite’ (Boellstorff 2007) – based on ethnographic data collected from informants aged forty years or older in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. I was struck by how this group used the category ‘transgender’ with reference to a particular time in life that stretched from mid-teens to late twenties, a period marked by national and transnational migration for intensive sex work and other labor. Their use of ‘transgender’ to describe certain times of their lives but not others validates scholarly calls to question the privileging of gender and sexuality in analyses of subjectivity. It also troubles the basis of Western assumptions about aging and its relationship to the self, which presumes an experience of time as an orderly chronological progression. Finally, their use of ‘transgender’ demands closer attention to why the use of categories of gender and sexuality might shift across the life course. My informants’ narratives invite us to consider how people in different locations draw upon globalized categories to make meaning. Greater ethnographic attention towards how categories are drawn upon to produce and reflect subjectivity in diverse ways may produce a reflexive understanding of the relationship between categories and the context of entrenched structural inequalities in which they are used.

## Keywords

gender, sexuality, transgender, subjectivity, aging

## After productivity

Anthropology and other fields have illustrated the relationship between categories and power, documenting many instances of their circulation and use. In his study of gender and sexuality in Indonesia, Tom Boellstorff (2005, 8) writes that the use of the categories *gay* and *lesbi* force ‘crucial questions regarding globalization, similitude, and difference’. Following Boellstorff’s (ibid., 193) innovative use of ‘*gay*’ as a way to trouble notions of difference, I italicize ‘*transgender*’ throughout this think piece in order to impress upon readers that the category has been taken up in practice in Indonesia in ways that do not always refer to the meanings attached to it in the United States (Valentine 2007). I focus attention on the use of the term ‘*transgender*’ by *waria* in everyday life, combining perspectives on the globalization of gender and sexuality with an exploration of what we can learn from the use of categories related to particular experiences of inequality. In particular, I am interested in why ‘*transgender*’ is understood by *waria* to articulate certain experiences, chiefly youth and migration, but not others, namely old age and immobility.

As is common throughout Southeast Asia, there are many common categories used to describe male-bodied femininity in Indonesia: these include the older term ‘*wadam*’, the more recent ‘*waria*’, and the derogatory but widely used terms ‘*banci*’ and ‘*béncong*’ (see Oetomo 2000 and Boellstorff 2007 for definitions and brief histories). During fieldwork, I noticed that *waria* around forty years old and older used ‘*transgender*’ not to refer to a stable identity related to gender presentation. Instead, they used it to refer to a period of youth and in relation to particular spaces. They explained that this period was a time when they moved from small villages and cities to larger ones in Indonesia and Malaysia. In the context of urban migration, many *waria* engage in street-based and online sex work, using their youth and beauty as a form of ‘ethno-erotic capital’ (Meiu 2015). For example, one *waria* who had traveled frequently to Singapore in the mid-1990s for sex work explained that Indonesians were considered desirable by virtue of their ‘exotic’ (*exotis*) appearance. The *waria* who participated in my research more generally described this period of youthful beauty, money making, and migration as ‘becoming *transgender*’ (*jadi transgender*).

I base my arguments here on fieldwork conducted in the cities of Yogyakarta and Jakarta between February 2014 and June 2015, and data drawn mostly from informal conversations. Although the use of the category *transgender* was not the main focus of my doctoral fieldwork, I began to appreciate its importance after noting how the category was being used to structure stories about the past in everyday life. This is notable given that ‘*transgender*’ has only recently reached widespread use in Indonesia beyond mostly middle-class networks with transnational connections (Boellstorff 2011; Blackwood 2010, 198–202). This think piece therefore departs from valuable approaches framing ‘*waria*’ as a category related only to

gender and sexuality. This, in turn, means that I approach the relationship between '*waria*' and '*transgender*' not out of a desire for commensurability. Instead, I dwell on their very incommensurability to ask: How are '*transgender*' and other categories drawn upon and used in everyday life by *waria* to index certain experiences but not others? What might the use of '*transgender*', a term encountered in interaction with public health agencies, researchers, and nongovernmental organizations, reveal about how the subjects of such discourses interpret them? Lastly, how might understanding everyday 'narratives of the self' (Najmabadi 2014) enhance the analytical utility of subjectivity in questions related to health and inequality? I suggest that doing so forces us to think about how the concept of subjectivity might offer 'new ways to engage particularities of affect, cognition, moral responsibility, and action' (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007, 1).

Two claims underpin this think piece. First, I reiterate feminist anthropology's longstanding commitment to understanding that categories and their use reflect culturally specific forms of personhood (Strathern 1988). Such perspectives are manifest most recently in work such as Marlon Bailey's (2013, 23), who draws on queer theory as a way to examine what people '*do*' as opposed to who they '*are*'. Second, I argue that these understandings benefit from renewed interest in material concerns, such as Svati Shah's (2014) focus on migration, labor, and sex work in India. Drawing these ideas together is a concern for the slippages between what categories are supposed to mean and their use in everyday life. In this think piece, I describe how this use of '*transgender*' to narrate a time of youth and migration reflects a visibility associated with sex work as a kind of spectacle. This is one reason why *waria* have been the sustained target of HIV and other public health campaigns in Indonesia since at least the 1990s (Lubis et al. 1997).

It thus comes as no surprise that it was through HIV-awareness campaigns in the early 2000s that many *waria* first learned of the term '*transgender*'. I speculate that this is one reason why *waria* now aged forty years and older associate the term strongly with experiences of youth, given that they often first heard it in the context of street-based sex work. The fact that their erotic labor exposed them to risk, chiefly in the form of HIV, made them the target of campaigns with limited medical resources during this period in their lives. Once *waria* passed beyond the age narrated as '*transgender*', access to these limited medical resources diminished. However, this does not necessarily reflect how, like João Biehl's (2005) description of 'zones of abandonment' in Brazil, *waria* are left to languish beyond the margins of state, family, and global health initiatives. Rather it crystalizes that, for *waria*, 'being *transgender*' represents access to temporary, partial forms of health care associated with economic productivity. Such a perspective also forces critical questions about the relationship between value and visibility for those who participate in sex work, and the way that health resources are allocated and deployed in relation to them.

In the case of *waria* of this generation in Indonesia, ‘*transgender*’ has become useful as a way to narrate experiences of youth and value in sex-work markets. As observed in other contexts, categories are a way to articulate ‘certain aspects of daily lived experience but not others’ (Valentine 2007, 18). Doing so helps to ‘figure out the shaping of local emergences within the global networks and flows’ (Najmabadi 2014, 294). Put more forcefully, I am interested in why *waria* use this particular term to refer only to a particular time in life. The stories that I present here articulate the distinctions that matter to *waria* in their understandings of ‘*transgender*’. As I have indicated, these relate not only to gender and sexuality but also to youth and migration. Of particular importance here are the ways in which certain categories make forms of life visible and thus facilitate their survival, while others become contingent and unrecognizable. It also suggests that the spectacle of certain spaces of sex work and the categories used to articulate them render invisible other forms of erotic labor, even as these intersect in many ways. Given that this is the case, I stress that it is not just one individual or group of individuals who might describe themselves as ‘*transgender*’ in Indonesia. In fact, I found that as *waria* grow older they use different categories as meaningful ways to describe their experiences.

## Becoming transgender

One hot afternoon during fieldwork, five *waria* friends aged from forty to sixty years and I gathered together on the floor of a small one-meter-square boarding house room (*kost*) to smoke, drink coffee, and while away the hours. As was usually the case, we talked about contact with family, an issue almost every *waria* I spoke to considered important. In the context of this discussion about family and estrangement from them, Josie explained that it was during high school in Jakarta when she ‘became *transgender*’. She said that after she ‘fell down [*turun*] to become *transgender*’, a period of adjustment took place in which she came to ‘exist [*eksis*] in the *transgender* world’. Everyone nodded solemnly, sharing similar stories of ‘becoming *transgender*’. Such descriptions were tinged with nostalgia as they depicted a world of younger and more beautiful selves inhabiting well-known locations for sex work and intimacy. Afterwards, another friend and I chatted about what Josie had meant when she spoke of ‘becoming *transgender*’. While acknowledging that the term had only recently entered everyday parlance, Josie’s friend added that for her, ‘*transgender* is all about sex work and cruising [*nyebong*]’. ‘*Nyebong*’ is a complex term that *waria* use to describe spaces for sex work and intimacy that emerged in cities around Indonesia in greater number from the 1960s onwards. It is at *nyebong* that these *waria* performed their most glamorous and visible femininity. Such spaces are generally described in the mass media either as red light districts or areas for sex work. For *waria*, on the other hand, these are recognizable places for solidarity, friendship, and income generation. *Nyebong* is part of what these *waria* encountered upon migration to cities: it is there that they ‘became *transgender*’.

In Indonesia, one meaning of '*transgender*' among *waria* appears to be that it marks a certain temporal episode. I am interested in how this offers one example where an understanding of material concerns – such as migration and labor – might fruitfully be placed in dialogue with subjectivity. The distinction over whether one is *transgender* or not boils down to participation in national and transnational sex work. Participation in these economies relies on youthful attractiveness; this, of course, is fleeting. *Waria* understand this better than anyone else, which is one reason they put a great deal of resources into saving as much money as possible and training for a more sustainable career.

Categories have been analyzed in studies of gender and sexuality, most notably by scholars who have explored both their disciplining and productive functions (Foucault 1978; Butler 1990). David Valentine (2007) argues that the category 'transgender' emerged in the 1990s in the United States as a powerful tool for activism because it clarified both a theoretical distinction between gender and sexuality and reflected changing understandings of personhood. Central to this process was an emergent stress on identity as key to rights-based struggles. In developing these insights, Valentine (2007, 18) suggests that although 'transgender' may be a useful tool for social activism in the United States, it is also important to pay attention to the inequalities that its establishment and use might unwittingly reproduce: 'we could more profitably see them as tools for actively extracting certain aspects of daily lived experience but not others'. New categories, thus conceptualized, are not only disciplinary technologies but also offer alternative ways to narrate the self.

Seen in this light, Josie's statement – that she 'fell down to the *transgender* world' – encourages an analytical shift, focusing attention on the ways that categories are taken up differently in different locations and the way that the self is refracted through them as they globalize. Such ethnographic evidence reiterates how 'other histories of gender and sexuality' (Johnson 1997, 37) shape social worlds, emerging out of engagement with a range of sources. In the Indonesian context, the use of the term '*transgender*' has not necessarily led to an 'erasure of desire' (Valentine 2003) or encouraged an articulation of the self based on white, middle-class values as it has in the United States (Valentine 2007). Rather, '*transgender*' is used in everyday stories to articulate a self who is valuable when migrating to cities to make money, described as both pleasurable and exhausting. The period that follows is a time that my informants referred to as 'not *transgender* anymore' (*tidak jadi transgender lagi*). For *waria*, the association between youth and access to erotic capital is the key marker of these narratives of the self and thus of 'configuring one's sense of being in the world' (Najmabadi 2014, 276).

One reason why *waria* use '*transgender*' to describe themselves in this way, despite the other categories available to them, is that it links progression through the life course to economic productivity. For example, recent Indonesian state discourse has referred to beggars and buskers as potentially 'productive' (*produktif*) citizens, with such individuals the target of a

combination of punitive and educational forms of ‘rehabilitation’. This stress on productivity is what makes ‘*transgender*’ an important and meaningful category when *waria* describe past experiences. The conventional Western meaning of ‘transgender’ usually refers to gender identity or presentation. Josie’s rather different stress on youth, productivity, and visibility in her use of the term invites consideration of other forces that have shaped her subjectivity. In comparison, Boellstorff describes how the category ‘men who have sex with men’ (MSM) is based on not identifying as gay, an ‘anticipatory injunction’ (2011, 295) and futile attempt to focus on behavior rather than identification (ibid., 303). In her use of ‘*transgender*’, by contrast, Josie understands a shift in identification as related to growing older rather than as a part of the self that can be described as gender or sexuality. She can say that she was once *transgender* only because the term is no longer a meaningful way to describe herself. ‘*Transgender*’ in the narratives of these *waria* can only be applied temporarily, linked to their identification as part of a ‘key population’, to use the language of HIV organizations. For these *waria*, this narrative clarifies the difference between the productive and unproductive times in life. This is acutely felt among those for whom beauty and youth produce erotic capital in sex-work economies. That it appears in the guise of a category that has globalized successfully as part of campaigns that address the HIV epidemic is no coincidence. Indeed, a widespread and rather macabre term for HIV among *waria* is ‘the beautiful disease’ (*sakit cantik*). This refers to a connection between those thought to ‘sell well’ (*laku*) in sex-work markets and desirability. Such beautiful individuals, *waria* say, face an increased probability of contacting the virus.

## Migration and value

Josie is not alone in starting accounts of the past with the statement, ‘when I was *transgender*’. Yulie also explained her first contact with ‘*transgender*’ as something that she associated with HIV campaigns and the widespread practice of being paid ‘transport money’ (*uang transport*) of between 25,000 and 50,000 Indonesian rupiah (approximately US\$2–5) to have a blood test. She also related it to a constellation of other categories used in narrating the self to migration abroad, explaining: ‘I think *transgender* is *waria* or *ladyboy* – yes, *ladyboy* as well, that’s what *transgender* means. It is about being visible [*nampak*]’. In previous discussions, Yulie had explained in some detail what she meant by ‘*ladyboy*’. Echoing the experiences of other *waria*, she said she ‘became a *ladyboy*’ because ‘working in Indonesia does not pay enough money’. In this context, the term ‘*ladyboy*’ describes movement from Indonesia to wealthier parts of Southeast Asia, where erotic capital is concentrated. Popi, who moved almost constantly between Sumatra and Malaysia during the 1990s, explained, ‘I became a *ladyboy* to make money while I was still young’. For Popi and others, ‘*ladyboy*’ is not a synonym for ‘*transgender*’ but rather a spatial category that overlaps it, describing participation in forms of transnational sexual commerce linked to regional ‘intimate economies’ (Wilson 2004).

Informants suggested a close relationship between being *transgender* and money in an environment of temporary but exhausting commercial sex work. Yet money was not all that shaped experiences of being *transgender*; this period was also central to making a fulfilled life possible. This was because it both entailed making money and because those experiences are also at the core of what it is to be a *waria*. In conversation Yulie explained, 'We need to be *transgender* for a while, we need it to be satisfied. It's a problem when we become old but we haven't experienced everything that we need to'. For most, the time that one was *transgender* was marked not only by sexual labor but also a certain type of upward mobility and possibilities for intimacy. By contrast, Lina explained that she was '*transgender* just for money'. Lina dressed in female clothing and wore makeup only in order to access the spaces *waria* describe as *nyebong*, thus occupying what she called the '*transgender* world' (*dunia transgender*) in an even more fleeting sense. These descriptions offer some sense of how using '*transgender*' to describe the self is associated with a particular notion of making money through sex work, but that it is also considered both a productive and pleasurable period in life. '*Transgender*' might be understood here as used to articulate a subjectivity formed by economic forces, jointly shaped by migration and youthful desirability as they enable access to erotic capital.

The contingent meanings of '*transgender*', as used to describe some moments in the life course but not others, illustrate one example of its use as it has globalized. The use of '*transgender*' to describe oneself implied a world beyond Indonesia and the village, and access to monetary gain through sexual labor in the national and transnational marketplace. '*Transgender*' articulates certain trajectories through the circuits of global capitalism; it also allows *waria* to make sense of their declining value in markets where youth is an important resource. Clifford Geertz (1983) offers valuable insights into this relationship between personhood, temporality, and value. He argues that out of all forms of the awareness of time, 'surely among the most important is by the recognition in oneself and in one's fellowmen of the process of biological aging, the appearance, maturation, decay, and disappearance of concrete individuals' (ibid., 389).

In stressing the importance of understanding time as culturally determined rather than a universal experience, Geertz (ibid., 389) emphasizes that 'between a people's conception of what it is to be a person and their conception of the structure of history there is an unbreakable internal link'. Whereas in Western contexts personhood is linked to the regularity of reproductive and capitalist time, the Balinese emphasis on a complex relationship with the cosmos means that they are confronted with an 'image which the biological, psychological, and sociological concomitants of being alive, the mere materialities of historical time, tend only to obscure from sight' (ibid., 389). Yet, whereas for Geertz the Balinese maintain 'a detemporalized conception of time' (ibid., 398) in which they live in 'a motionless present, a vectorless now' (ibid., 404), his analysis does not account for subjective experiences of time or the material context in which time unfolds. From this perspective,

accounts of the culturally specific processes of aging benefit from engagement with gender and sexuality. This is particularly important in thinking through the various implications of the close relationship between youth and erotic capital globally (Meiu 2015). As George Paul Meiu (*ibid.*, 476) identifies, this is one way to ‘reconcile the divergent rhythms of competing notions of age and ageing’ in the context of rapid economic transformations. I suggest that it also offers important insights into the relationship between forms of visibility, particularly those related to sex work, and certain material investments in health.

These thoughts on how youth and migration inform the use of ‘*transgender*’ for these *waria* stimulate a number of other questions. In particular, it suggests the limits of frameworks offered by gender and sexuality. In the United States, Valentine (2003) writes that to stress singular categories in the description of certain types of experiences and subjects at times leads to the effacement of desire. For Valentine’s (*ibid.*) informants, it was essential to unlearn certain aspects about the self in order to be recognized in particular settings through a framework of ‘identity’. In Indonesia, by contrast, desire remains important inasmuch as it relates to markets of erotic capital that can be accessed during a particular period in life. By linking ‘*transgender*’ to a folk understanding of productivity and capitalist value, my informants reflect how economic calculation has become a central principle in Indonesia, not only in the organization of social life (Rudnyckj 2010) but of an individual’s value.

The description of the self as ‘*transgender*’ then stems from experiences that are not only productive but painful; it includes a period of migration and sex work, coupled with forms of biological vulnerability. This suggests that certain terms are used to reflect not only particular subjects but also to describe how those subjects are more or less valuable across the life course. Yet it is equally important to stress that this period also brings enjoyment and pleasure in the form of intensive sociality, travel, and material gains. In the conversations with *waria* I have introduced, migration and youth are as central as gender and sexuality in understanding the self.

## Conclusion

The ways that *waria* use ‘*transgender*’ demonstrate the need to bring subjectivity into dialogue with more material concerns related to migration, labor, and access to healthcare. Recollections by *waria* that start with ‘when I was *transgender*’ reveal how the globalization of categories intersects with migration and erotic economies, one reason perhaps why for *waria* ‘true social acceptance remains an open question’ (Boellstorff 2007, 112). It is this vexed visibility that means that *waria* are, as they commonly say, ‘of value’ (*berbarga*) only for a limited period. This, in turn, suggests the perpetuation of various kinds of invisibility: not only for *waria* living after being *transgender* but also for other subjects of desire in erotic



economies. This includes young men who sell sex (*keucing*) who, even though they circulate in spaces very close to *waria*, struggle to receive access to medical care. This invisibility persists despite the fact that they are in the prime of their productive years.

The relationship here between visibility and invisibility suggests the value of ethnographic approaches to the globalization of categories, and the patterns of inequality and exclusion that may thereby be revealed. For example, the everyday use of categories such as '*transgender*' and '*ladyboy*' has offered *waria* new possibilities to articulate the relationship between sex and the economy. For complex reasons the categories 'MSM' and 'gay', on the other hand, tend to foreclose the possibility of articulating a relationship to sex work; this is perhaps why young men in erotic economies remain far less visible. In my experience, young male sex workers often gain access to care from HIV and public health organizations that provide support to those who identify or are categorized as *transgender*. This is sometimes the only way that these young men receive access to medical care at all. The care work that *waria* perform is, for the most part, also invisible. I observed many working tirelessly, and for the most part voluntarily, to make sure these young men received some form of treatment for HIV/AIDS. How might the temporal and spatial dimensions of 'being *transgender*' reflect the ways that public health and the social sciences are implicated in the cultural logics of inequality and invisibility? And what might a focus on subjectivity reveal about the value of those who are no longer young, who can no longer migrate, or who simply do not appear in more visible forms of sex work?

Recognizing that '*transgender*' is used by *waria* in Indonesia in the ways I have described interrupts a concern for origins and stability in accounts of subjectivity. Doing so demands that we 'fall out of love a little with sexuality' (Moore 2011, 105) in order to account for different ways of describing the self. '*Transgender*' is indeed a useful category deployed in meaningful ways by my informants, but it also gestures towards the kinds of life that are possible beyond it. In the face of such descriptions of the self, categories become much more than what to call people or how to describe their experiences. In the field, we must look for the ways in which people engage in practices of 'dubbing culture' (Boellstorff 2005) at the same time as attending to how such dubbing relates to the material conditions in which people live. Attending to the ways that categories familiar to us are used in unfamiliar ways offers new perspectives on the visibility of some subjects and invisibility of others, as both grow old in the context of various forms of inequality.

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