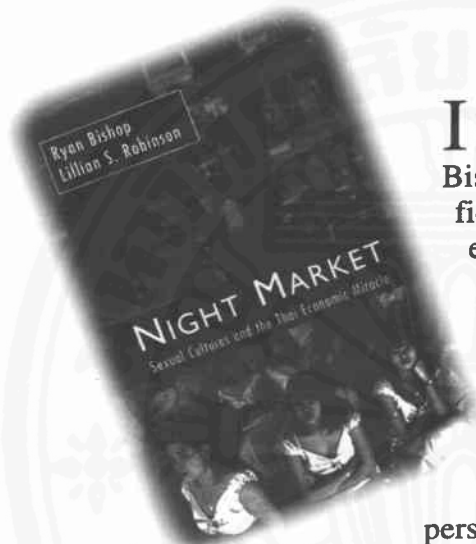


# **Global Commodities:** **(Post) Colonial Sexualities** **and Economies**



In *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle*, Ryan Bishop and Lillian Robinson draw on fictional, popular, critical, political and economic texts to evaluate and trace the complex relationships between the sex tourism industry and Thailand's economic development. Bishop and Robinson begin their work by explicitly locating themselves as *farang* (foreign) academics and explaining their personal relationships to the project; they limit their analysis to North American and Western European sex tourism precisely because they are (in)directly entangled in it. This critical move is key to the success of *Night Market* as a post-colonial critique of sexual, economic, and political imperialism because they are clear in their assertion that they only speak 'about' Thai sex tourism, never 'for' sex workers.

Following Bishop and Robinson's thoughtful subject-positioning in Chapter 1, "Points of Departure: Catalysts and Contexts", they move in Chapter 2, "Naming the Problem," to thinking about representations of Thai tourism and sex tourism in Thai and foreign economic and tourism texts as well as in Western mass media. They suggest that effective academic work and mass media would offer a more nuanced, integrated analysis of culture, sex work and globalization than currently exists.

## REVIEW BY

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### ***Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle.***

By Ryan Bishop and Lillian  
Robinson. New York: Routledge,  
1998. 278 pp., US\$17.95  
paperback (ISBN 0415-914-299).

Chapter 3, “Languages of Tourism”, is an examination of tourism as a solution to Thailand’s economic problems as well as various kinds of tourism discourse. More specifically, Bishop and Robinson problematize rhetoric about and representations of Thailand in travel journalism, guidebooks, and travel brochures. In this chapter, they are very clear that the international ruling elite, not only the Thai elite, “values the bodies of poor women and makes these corporeal commodities a primary impetus for mass tourist travel” (p. 76).

In Chapter 4, “A Very Political Economy”, Bishop and Robinson argue that existing research and literature on Thailand’s political economy leaves out an analysis of the sex industry’s role in the economy and also how the sex tourism industry has been formed by international development policies. This silence around sex tourism, they argue, is particularly ironic because tourism has been the largest source of much-needed foreign exchange since 1982. Bishop and Robinson argue for an integrated analysis of political economy which acknowledges that sexuality is part of political economy because (sex) tourism plays a key role in Thailand’s economic development.

In Chapter 5, “Imagining Sexual Others”, Bishop and Robinson examine texts which have functioned to exoticize and marginalize non-Western cultures and sexual practices beginning with eighteenth-century colonial texts and finishing with Cleo Odzer’s *Patpong Sisters*. They argue that the problematic representations of Thai and other non-Western sexualities in these texts serve to form not only the context which Western sex tourists function within, but possibly the very basis for them to become sex tourists.

Chapter 6, “The Bar Scene”, is a collection of ethnographic accounts of sex workers, sex tourists and (s)expats. Soi Cowboy, which is frequented by expats and sex tourists is described as well as Suttisan, a Bangkok site of the indigenous sex industry. Additionally, Bishop, who did much of the fieldwork for this chapter, interviewed Bernard Trink and offers a useful and insightful analysis of Trink and the (il)logic behind his *Bangkok Post columns*.

In Chapter 7, “The Unspeakable”, Bishop and Robinson question and explicate national and international silence around the Thai sex tourism industry. They argue that since tourism provides the capital necessary for continued industrialization and “modernization”, breaking silence about the sex industry has been read as threatening to modernization itself. Bishop and Robinson point to Sanitsuda Ekachai’s 1990 book, *Behind the Smile: Voices of Thailand* as an example of a text which

breaks silence around the sex industry, and so therefore “makes such exploitation more difficult to maintain”(Bishop and Robinson, p. 208).

Finally, Bishop and Robinson draw on sexual theorists from Bernard Trirk to Judith Butler to locate the Thai sex tourism industry within a broader field of commercial and non-commercial sexualities in Chapter 8, “Sexual Theory and Its Discontents”. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the economics of sexual labor and situates Thai sex tourism within an international system of sexual alienation and exploitation.

Ryan Bishop and Lillian Robinson’s *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle* presents an accessible and critical understanding of the connections between the Thai sex industry, the Thai economy and international development policies. They bring an economic analysis into sexual politics and a critique of sex tourism into economics, healing a split which has been perpetuated in much writing both about the Thai economy and the Thai sex industry. Bishop and Robinson further offer hope that breaking silence about the sex industry, its causes and its effects, will spark change. However, in their failure to seriously focus on indigenous and transnational resistance to the sex tourism industry, Bishop and Robinson have left out a crucial analysis of how sex workers and their allies are breaking silence and making change. For the most part, they dismiss Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Re-creation (EMPOWER), noting that they work with too few women to have much of an effect. While the efforts of EMPOWER and the Global Alliance Against the Trafficking of Women (GAATW), which is not mentioned at all, may be on a small scale, their resistance is important precisely because they are struggling within a totalizing global context of capitalism, imperialism and sexuality. Bishop and Robinson close their final chapter by calling for solutions which are as wide-ranging as the problem itself; however, until a new global economic and sexual order is ushered in, all resistance efforts must be supported and given critical attention.