Film Commentary #2 – “Middle Sexes”

One theme apparent within both the film and this week’s readings is conceptions of the self as intrinsic upon or exclusive of embodiment. This brings up questions concerning how individuals conceive of their “true/essential self”. Sometimes this self is understood as body-bound, and other times it is seen as transcendent of form. Notions of incompleteness, absence, and wholeness are important in these contexts. It is difficult to fully understand and track the variance within these conceptions (especially in the scope of this assignment), but I think it would be interesting to explore the disparity.

In the portrayal of the hijra in “Middle Sexes”, sex change was thought of as a kind of initiation into the sisterhood of hijras. The sex change signified the final step of transformation for the hijra. In this example, corresponding genitalia is necessary for “wholeness”. “Authentic identity”, in this instance, is not independent of physical form. The filmmakers problematically suggest that Hinduism is part of the reason that transsexuals were not necessarily tabooed within India. They posit the Lord Shiva’s adrogyne as evidence that India is perhaps more familiar and comfortable with this identification. I think it would be interesting to explore the example of Shiva as a potential authoritative resource for alternatives to the male/female binary (final paper?).

Later in the film, we are introduced to a gang of lady-boys in Thailand. The variations in conceptions of “true self” are abundant within this group. For some, sex changes were imperative to the attainment of this abstract self. For others,genitalia was not necessarily pertinent to their gender-identification. In this case, the penis is not necessarily a symbol of masculinity but rather constituent of how the individual has come to recognize/understand herself. However, in another instance the American male partner of the lady-boy voiced that he wanted his girlfriend to keep her penis because it meant that her “male desires” would not be compromised. He is thus suggesting that even though his girlfriend identifies as female, she is still susceptible to the “desires/needs” that are inherent to her male genitalia. In a way, he is positing an agency onto genitalia that is autonomous of the individual.

Notions of embodiment became increasing complex and diverse in Boellstorff’s ethnography of Second Life. Specifically in the example of “wearing”, which is essentially the ability to change embodiments from anything from a baby to a blue orb. “Wearing” suggests that there exists a constant choosing-self that might be exclusive of embodiment. But, it still seems that we are constantly searching for ways in which to formalize the formless, and we use gender to do this. Consequently, we cannot help but be “body-bound”. Any interactive situation is inescapably gendered. Is it possible to refrain from positing form unto the unintelligible? Can we transcend body and say yes to formlessness? Second life suggests not.