

BOOK REVIEW

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Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias*. New York: New York University Press, 2014. 256 pp.

Eng-Beng Lim's *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* does something fresh with anthropology's usual suspects. Culture and ritual are shaken and undone in a kinesthetic history of the classically known *kecak* dance in Bali. Power relationships are finessed in a critical analysis of the racial and sexual implications of homoerotic desire between the rice queen and Asian boy coupling, or what Lim terms the "queer colonial dyad." This dyad is both literally the stereotype of the white man/Asian boy couple in a homosexual partnership, as well as the discursive trope of white colonialism and feminized Asia in a homoeroticized context.

Lim sets precedence for his study when he explains that, "the critical focus on the native boy is crucial since he, unlike the brown woman, is often cast as a superfluous character, a neglected critical trope, or [is] simply missing from the archives" (9). He grounds this focus by exploring the effects of globalization on performance in relation to nations' anxious embrace of queer capital. Lim takes us on sweeping stage-tours, starring the "Asian male as native boy in love with the white man around the world" (138). Smartly chosen, the sites of transnational exposure in the book include Bali (the epicenter of what would become an illustrious tropical paradise for American anthropologists and bohemian expatriates in the 1930s and 1940s), Singapore (considered a model of globalizing democracy and capital in Asia), and New York City (where artists still perform some of the most significant works in Asian and Asian-diasporic performance). "My main interest," says Lim, "in foregrounding this well-known and yet unspeakable love story is the way that it serves as an allegory for the white man/native dyad that organizes the production and reception of

Asian performance writ large” (4). Succinct but dense, Lim’s monograph is an indispensable contribution to literature in queer post-colonialism and Asian and Asian-diasporic racial formation.

Lim’s most entrancing chapter is his first. “A Colonial Dyad in Balinese Performance” tracks the social life of post-colonialism through one individual’s homo-orientalist masterminding of national discourse through performance. Pulling the curtain aside to reveal Indonesia’s transformation from “feudal” colony to “unspoiled tropical paradise” in the 1930s (42), this chapter features the homoerotic obsession with the native boy and ethno-biodrama of Walter Spies, a German artist and Baliophile. Spies hosted a café salon of US household names such as Margaret Mead, Cole Porter, and Charlie Chaplin, who would shape the global discourse of what later became a legendary destination in the far-east tropics. The performance at the heart of his artistic homo-orientalism is *kecak*, a pulsating “monkey dance” (42) of “100 naked men” (60) moving in concentric circles in the shadows of a ritualistic oil lamp. To this day, the dance is performed only to tourists in Bali. Under Spies’s direction, *kecak* included significant changes to *cak* chorus and trance-dance derived from the exorcistic ritual *Sanghyang Dedari*. Lim positions his analysis of *kecak* in response to dominant academic thought that has, for decades, obfuscated the relevance of Spies’s homosexual relations with Balinese males in relation to the dance (60–65). Citing a corpus of literature that makes no mention of Spies’s homosexuality, reactionary listserv exchanges, and public lectures where he received backlash, Lim sharply critiques the erasure of Walter Spies’s homo-orientalist fantasies about Bali, Spies’s personal and ethical choices in engaging with Balinese men and boys, and Spies’s colonialist fantasy of Bali as conjured through his invention of *kecak*.

To achieve this racial and queer critique in Chapter 1, Lim offers an archival analysis of Spies’s *kecak*. Spies was eventually contracted to choreograph the ritualistic-appearing dance that in fact he invented and termed *kecak* for the orientalist film *Island of Demons* (1931), though Spies “himself tried to veil his contribution to the form” (84).¹ Lim cites several examples of Spies’s homoerotic descriptions of *kecak* in specific detail, writing against the dominant academic discourses that deny the dance’s homosexual connotations. Among many examples in support of this point, Lim quotes Spies’s annotations of photographs that eroticized male performers with explicit sexual language, such as “‘erect but rising, rising, rising’; ‘hoarse

ejaculations” (68). Lim includes several more graphic textual and photographic examples from the historical archive of Spies’s personal notes, making the point that “the circles of *kecak* were also a palpably homoerotic fantasy about Bali and materialized a site in which to channel Walter Spies’s desire ‘for the boys’” (68). Lim’s telling of *kecak* in the context of Spies’s life is part of a broader narrative of the colonialist history of the queer dyad which, through its erasure, naturalizes Balinese racial formation and cultural artifacts. As Lim eloquently describes, “The dyad thus persists as an epistemic curiosity in the closet of the ritual’s history even as its queer deeds are an open secret, both a doing and a thing done” (52).

Lim smartly draws a kinesthetic history between *kecak* and its predecessor, *puputan*, to tell a larger story about the role of the body and performance in the West’s colonial, racial conjuring of Asia. *Puputan* was a term coined by Dutch colonials to “describe certain Balinese combat practices...Dutch colonials had deliberately orientalized them as a ‘kind of amok’ in which Balinese men dressed in white and ‘armed with lances and krisses’ threw themselves on the enemy, ‘seeking death’” (54). In contrast, Lim quotes the self-entitled beliefs of Spies and his collaborators, who believed that *kecak* could stave off colonial conquest: “‘Having leisure, my friend Spies and I started a scheme which would tend to slow down the invading forces from the West’” (57). This “scheme” included legislation that would transform the island nation of Bali into an international park. *Kecak*, in the context of this broader Balinizing project, was intended to halt colonialism, as opposed to rationalize a violent occupation, like *puputan* did. However, both inventions (*puputan* and *kecak*) legitimized Western domination in the process of defining Indonesian “culture.” *Puputan* named a kind of fighting style that rationalized Dutch colonialism over a people with “savage” ritual tendencies, and *kecak* was an invention of one white expatriate man who was convinced his conjuring of Bali as a cultural fetish could “save” the nation from colonialist overtake.

To be clear, Lim’s primary directive in Chapter 1—and the intelligence of his critique—is not an anthropological tabloid of *kecak* as a choreographed “gay ritual orgy” featuring native boys and a white daddy voyeur (72). In a sustained analysis of what he calls a “compulsory love for the white man,” Lim reads *kecak* as a biographical performance as “one way to denaturalize the triumphant life story of another intrepid European traveler in the East” (72). Among several accomplishments in this chapter, Lim breaks the tropic spell of the colonial dyad in *kecak*’s form and formation

in the context of three main histories: Spies's life, the transformation of pre-war-era North American anthropology, and transnational politics that shaped the world's view of the Far East. Lim tells a fascinating story about how one person can institutionalize his conjuring of Bali in a tropic spell made possible through a conspiracy of the café salon and the dissemination of colonialist fantasy through dance, film, and writing.

Expanding the queer colonial dyad's relation to contemporary nationalism in Chapter 2, Lim's second theoretical contribution is sifted through a larger debate between Dennis Atiman's (2001) "global gay" story of the universalization of a homogenized gay identity, and Joseph Massad's (2007) "Gay International" critique of the colonial power structures that make it impossible for same-sex desire to be removed from culture as nations endure globalization. Titled, "The Global Asian Queer Boys of Singapore," this chapter elevates previous discussions by examining the transformation of the dyad in the post-colonial father-state and its gay citizenry in Singapore, as the fast-developed nation brands itself as "New Asia" (28). Here, the tropic spell goes national in the transmorgification of the "Asian Communitarian Father" turned "white daddy" turned "Asian State daddy" in a campy horror-porno-mentary of Singaporean modernity. Whiteness here references two complex themes: the influence of Evangelical Christianity in state-sanctioned homophobia and what Lim refers to as the "whiteness" of the People's Action Party's (PAP) corruption-free and no-nonsense approach to governance (112). The disturbing transformation of the state into multiple and simultaneous forms is key to Lim's analysis of the movement of the colonial dyad into nationalist discourses.

Through the theatrical performance series *Asian Boys Vol. 1*, which became a Singaporean pop culture phenomenon in 2000, Lim traces the queer dyad's effect on nationalism. Singapore's Censorship Review Committee (CRC) institutionalized censorship of homosexuality onstage; however, its policy changed in 2003: "To attract talent, there calls for an environment with less restrictive censorship guidelines and more diverse choices"² (104). What Lim calls the "Singaporean Sling" is noosed up along multiple vectors that discipline the post-colonial dyad in its new form as the Singaporean State and Asian Boy. "Asia's new gay capital" converges at the crossings of traveling Evangelical Christianity, Singapore's aspirations and anxieties in its frenzied embrace with global capital, and "Asian queer boys" in a national phenomenon of pop culture. Lim explains

that, "*Asian Boys Vol. 1* stages a unique inter-Asian construction of global queerness by drawing on Indian myths, Chinese soap operas, Japanese popular culture, Malay folklore, and Singaporean urban legends, as well as Western gay male iconography" (104). The play's central character is the fag hag and distorted symbol of the nation, Agnes, who travels Singapore in a story of queer citizenry told in nine acts. Agnes is accompanied by Boy, who anonymously narrates the story of the nation. He leads a cadre of multicultural, g-stringed Asian boys (three Chinese, one Malay, and one Caucasian) who undulate around Agnes's mystical figure. The series' significance is the role which performance played in queering a nation, especially in the face of its contradictory political and social censorship.

Lim's key framing in this chapter is the juridical sling of Singapore's anti-sodomy and censorship laws that form the tangled nest of contradictions where the new Asian queer boy emerges. Lim argues that "the 'sudden,' performative visibility of a queer public has to be understood in the context of the state's imperative to transform itself from draconian father-state into a sexy, global city in the new millennium" (119). Lim's intervention to the division between global gay theorists and queer cultural relativists is what he calls "glocalqueering." He explains that glocalqueering in *Asian Boys* is where "local artists, actors, activists, and gay boys on the street, together with censors, bureaucrats, and evangelicals, are all actively involved or invested in negotiating queer representations as they relate to the citizen-subject of Singapore's political, cultural, and social institutions" (118). For Lim, the complex political, social, and juridical apparatuses are not simply signs of a nation-building fraught with contradiction, but also reveal a complex orientation toward transforming global capital and queer citizenry in the process.

One interesting limitation to Lim's discussion of glocalqueering relates to the question, what if we were to "glocalize" homophobia? The discussion of Singapore in Chapter 2 brings some of the associated complexities to the fore. Here, Lim brings into view the National Council of Churches in Singapore (NCCS), which attracts a burgeoning class of educated, English-speaking, upwardly-mobile Chinese Singaporeans and government and industry officials. The NCCS's "Statement on Homosexuality" urges the government not to allow the promotion of homosexual lifestyles and activities (130). Though Lim thoroughly complicates glocalqueering, he seems quick to conflate homophobia with whiteness in relation to Christianity, colonialism, and Singapore's strive for middle-class upward

mobility as a global city. Lim argues that, “while [the Singaporean boy] may play with the tricks of transnational capital as a sexy global Asian queer boy, he is also under the duress of Western colonial, moral, and religious dictates with a disciplinary Asian cover: the post-colonial daddy with a Sling in hand” (95). But is Singapore’s Christian Right merely an “Asian cover” for the Western Christian Right? This question is not to defend the role of white colonialism in informing homophobia. However, elsewhere, Lim writes more literally about the influence of the West on homophobia in Singapore: “The twist in the story is the figurative return of the colonial white man in the form of a vocal evangelical Christian Right minority leading the backlash against the country’s millennial queering” (129). Unlike the native boy in Asian boy dramas—which Lim argues are thoroughly multi-ethnic and resist racial homogenization—the colonial white daddy appears reconstituted as mostly the same hegemonic character, masquerading across multiple Singaporean sites, such as evangelical nationalist discourses. Just like Spies’s denial of his role and the homosexual undertones of *kecack* in Indonesian dance, the Singaporean colonial white daddy simultaneously desires the native boy, while he repudiates his and the native boy’s homosexuality in the proper nation-family. Is there room for glocalqueering of the colonial daddy in relation to multiple forms of “whiteness” (not just as an overdetermined Western evangelical-as-colonizer, but also more complex forms of non-white racial domination that appropriate whiteness) as a form of racial privilege and power? Seen in this way, “whiteness” is also glocal and potentially multi-ethnic, and so the colonial white daddy and other “white” forms of homophobia need also to be racially unpacked. While Lim offers a productive use of “glocal” in analyzing the globalization of homophobias (see also Murray 2009), his discussion does not extend in that direction.

So, what happens to the tropic spell when the native boy goes West? In Chapter 3, “GAP Drama, or the Gay Asian Princess goes to the US,” Lim points out the colonial obsession with and fear of enchantment by the tropic spell, a tension that is essential to the spell’s perpetuation. The “American mode of glocalqueering” is quintessentially represented by GAP, a versatile acronym for Gay Asian Princess, Gay Asian Pacific, or Gay Asian performance: “a mock assemblage of puns, wayward Asian identifications, and queer acts on improper routes and cartographies” (137). Lim tracks GAP’s theatrical cartographies in the Asian diasporas with Justin Chin’s 1994 solo performance, *Go, or The Approximate Infinite*

Universe of Mrs. Robert Lomax. Like many plays that recall the familiar white man/Asian boy romantic dyad, Chin's play claims thematic ancestry from the Broadway musical *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang (1988), and the 1960s orientalist film classic, *The World of Suzie Wong* by Richard Quine (1960). While both works have significantly shaped the limits of Asian male and female characters in US American popular media, Chin's *Mrs. Robert Lomax* queers these limits, addressing the uneasy contortions of glocalqueering in the West and the diaspora.

In a sophisticated layering, Lim's third chapter identifies a lineage of performances that shape Chin's *Mrs. Robert Lomax*, the queering of white male desire, and the subjugation of a feminized Asia, Asian females, and Asian bodies. Chin's play starts where Quine's *Suzie Wong* leaves off. Suzie's white male patriarch, Robert Lomax, is now sexless in his 60s, seeking gay exploits in Thailand with younger Asian men. "Boy" is Chin's main character, and Lomax's boy lover and tortured racial conscience. *Suzie Wong*'s significance as a classic 1960s film informs the orientalist themes that popularize the play *M. Butterfly* (1988), featuring the love affair of Chinese opera star Song and French diplomat Rene Gallimard. This play is based on the 19th century Chinese court case between French diplomat Bernard Coursicot and opera singer Pei Pu, who is discovered to be female. In the Broadway rendition of this court drama, Gallimard ultimately commits suicide in yellow face after uncovering the inglorious truth about Song's knowable body. This backdrop of American and Asian performance, legal, and social structures that shape compulsory love for the white man are exactly what Chin's *Mrs. Robert Lomax* aims to critique on stages across the US, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

A central feature of the dyad in Chin's theatrical rendition is the emotional and subjective void that Boy presents to Lomax. If *M. Butterfly* is the ghost of gay male Asian martyrdom in *Mrs. Robert Lomax*, then the play's disciplining imaginarium of Asian femininity is Suzie Wong. "But unlike Suzie," Lim emphasizes, "the Boy is a cynical participant who calls out Lomax's lascivious intentions: 'He wants to paint me, but I tell him that I don't want to be painted. He says, Paint to draw a picture of you. He thinks that I think that he wants to *paint* me. I tell him I know what the fuck he means, and he laughs'" (156). Unlike Lim's first chapter, where he does not aim to recuperate the agency of the consenting native boy in Spies's homo-orientalist fantasy, here he brings out differences in expressions of agency between Chin's GAP performance and Quine's Suzie Wong. In this

sense, Lim's critique is about how the native boy exercises agency within the queer colonial dyad's complex matrices of power.

With his examination of the irony of the white man's impotence—a symbol of the complexity of colonial power in Chin's play—Lim pushes our understanding of the queer colonial dyad further in Chapter 3. Unlike Suzie Wong, Boy is “in control and speaks out against [Lomax],” inverting the stereotype of Asian feminine subjugation under white colonial power. In contradistinction to Boy, Lomax is also characterized as eventually senile and sexually compromised. As Lim puts it, unlike the image of white colonial power, the reality is that Lomax “is a non-speaking, non-present role, and a helpless old man” (156). The queer dyad and the tropic spell are forms of sexuality whose hierarchies depend on the inflation of multiple matrices of power. Lim explains that Lomax has to “‘convince himself’ of liking ‘everything’ Asian, including positive thoughts on the beauty of Asians” (157). The sexual conquest of the native boy depends on the spell's permeation of its trance into the mind of the conjurer (in this case, Lomax), creating an almost dissociative subjectivity (where Lomax must deny his body's own impotence in this colonial conquest). Boy's emotional void is met with Lomax's impotent denial, and the implication of racial hatred underneath a highly unequal relation of power. Lim's analysis and apt choice of performance lineage aim to undo the things done by the queer dyad in the US through the complication of Boy and Lomax's relational subjectivities. Speaking more directly to a traveling trope of “rice queens” and “brown boys” in this chapter, Lim busts open the implications of gender, racial, and sexual subjectivities in an over-determined hierarchy of this Americanized colonial dyad.

In his final bow, Lim's introduces two additional concepts. To Lim's stage left is who the native boy becomes: what Lim calls the “minor native.” And to his right is where the colonial dyad goes next: what Lim refers to as “transcolonial borderzones.” Minor native refers to a shift toward understanding the native as a “repository of emotional effects and a sign of history's violation,” rather than the native as a “flexible, racial form that undergirds the logics of (self-)exoticizing display” (170-171). By transcolonial borderzones, Lim refers to a “transcolonial” relationship between “minorities and former colonies that share affinities and animosities that are primarily in relation to each other rather than or only to their respective (former) metropolises in Europe and the United States” (174). “Borderzones” builds on Ed Bruner's concept of touristic borderzones, whereby Lim describes “theatricalized

encounters, the touristic gaze, and an ‘ever-shifting’ spatial dynamic” as the conditions for the tropic spell’s performance (175). Lim’s conceptualization of the transcolonial borderzone challenges the binaries implied in discourses of migrant confrontation with borders in previous frameworks of economically-driven and racial hierarchies of just one dyadic encounter: “The United States may be the third or fourth point of contact in the history of transmigrants with multiple national or ethnic identifications” (173). The minor narrative’s existence at these transcolonial borderzones is key to Lim’s contribution to post-colonial racial theory, which now confronts the role of globalization in non-linear migration and subjects that move to the interstices of racial hierarchies.

Applying his two new concepts to contexts beyond queer performance, Lim’s most theoretically interesting move in his final chapter is to return to the figure of the native woman in relation to the native boy (an exploration he situates within the feminist critique of the white male orientalist desire for Asian women). This final chapter balances Lim’s comparison of Suzie Wong and Chin’s solo performance in the preceding chapter. Lim persuades us to see the colonial dyad as a set of coordinates (170), rather than a vertical plane of colonial power or lateral relationships of transcolonies in an ahistorical vacuum. The performance at the center of Lim’s theoretical claims is Chin Woon Ping’s *Details Cannot Body Wants* (1992), a solo performance that was the first to receive an R (Restricted) rating in Singapore. “So why are you fascinated by the native woman?” begins Chin (176). Lim argues that Chin’s performance of the native woman practices a kind of “visual sovereignty” in its gazing-back at the audience³. Lim argues, “Chin’s Woman [character] enters the fray of this transcolonial borderzone to address the comparable issue of nativization in the Asias,” specifically through visual sovereignty in performance (183). This feminist analysis of the queer colonial dyad is a necessary and productive looping back to the conditions of gendered and racial power that fuel tropic spells. With his analysis of a long-standing history of the Asian female lotus blossom, the queer colonial dyad and native boy are woven together in a family of discursive modes of conquest against a colonialist fantasy of Asia. With every page, *Brown Boys* will turn gazes for generations. ■

Endnotes:

¹As Lim notes, Spies technically worked in collaboration with four Balinese men and two non-Indonesian women, individuals whose influence is difficult to track in Lim's account of *kecak*.

²Here, Lim quotes the Singapore Media Development Authority's *Report of Censorship Review Committee* (Singapore: Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, 2003:51).

³Lim follows Michelle Raheja's (2010) idea of visual sovereignty in relation to what it means for indigenous people to "laugh at the camera" in the context of "often absurd assumptions" in visual representations of Native Americans (182).

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