

Unpacking Asian Queer Masculinity in Theater and Cinema: Postcolonial Imagination and Pleasure of Bottomhood

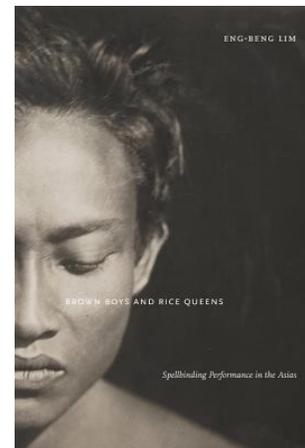
Eng-Beng Lim, **Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performances in the Asias**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

Nguyen Tan Hoang, **A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 320 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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In Asian American or Asian studies, the “model minority” argument claims that Asians are portrayed in a positive light by U.S. popular culture. This model minority image suggests that Asians, compared with other people of color, have a better work ethic, higher educational backgrounds, and stronger financial abilities (Paek & Shah, 2003). However, this portrayal does not hold when it comes to masculinity. Men of color other than Asians are usually represented as macho and hypersexual, while Asian men are coded as effeminate and asexual. In short, Asian masculinity in U.S. popular culture takes up a weak and undesirable position. While communication scholars and students have debated on and researched the issue of negative representations of Asian men, these two books provide an alternative analysis of Asian masculinity through the lens of postcolonial analysis and the notion of bottomhood, respectively. Both books share not only a similar theme, but also a similar unit of analysis—Asian masculinity in a dyadic, queer relationship.

Eng-Beng Lim’s **Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performances in the Asias** examines the postcolonial imaginations of brown boys from the eyes of the rice queens. He walks us through three Asian theatrical cases: *kecak*, a Balinese dance choreographed by German artist Walter Spies; *Asian Boys*, a queer theatrical play in Singapore; and *Go, or the Approximate Infinite Universe of Mrs. Robert Lomax*, a play written by Justin Chin. Lim argues that these performances are “a way to disrupt the naturalized repetition of various acts constituting the regulatory ideals, legibilities, and identifications of a colonial order and its global guises” (p. 40). That is, the old white-young brown dyadic relationship prevalent in the Asian American queer community. This white-brown bonding results from what Lim calls the “tropic spell,” which is cast on the both sides of the dyad. The spell makes this white-brown coupling natural, and thus a critical reading is required to unpack the power relationship behind it.



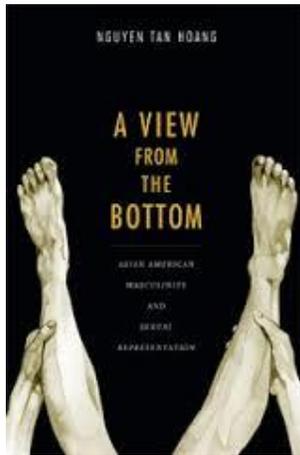
The dyad in each performance has to be interpreted under a larger social-historical context. Lim rediscovers the history of the Balinese dance *kecak*, arguing that it is not from authentic Balinese culture, but is adapted by the German choreographer Walter Spies, who is obsessed with Balinese boys. The original dance included female dancers, but Spies eliminated the role of them, rendering *kecak* performed only by half-naked men. Lim also reminds us that Spies is not only a choreographer in this dyad, but also a white man embodying the Dutch colonial power. Dutch colonialism constitutes Bali as a place for inspiration and vacation, where nameless Balinese men--the colonized, brown bodies--are consumed erotically and exotically.

Moving from Bali to Singapore, the Singaporean state-father takes up the position of the rice queen and its queer citizens take up the role of brown boys. Singapore was once an anti-homosexual state, but since the early 2000s, its government has realized that a more culturally free and sexually tolerant environment is crucial to attract overseas talent and investment. Therefore, while homosexuality still remains punishable under the penal code, it is seldom prosecuted. Lim analyzes *Asian Boys*, a surrealist queer play that blends several Asian traditional and popular cultures and Western gay discourse. In the play, Agnes is guided by Boy to travel across a variety of queer scenes found in Indian, Singaporean, Malay, Batak, and Anglo-Canadian cultures. Lim sees this as a personification of the postcolonial state experimenting with its queer policy under its capitalist economy. Here, Lim introduces "glocalqueering" as a critical approach to queer politics in Asia. It is "an inter-Asian diasporic framework that produces new models of cross-cultural understanding about queer sexuality" (p. 96), an alternative to the taken-for-granted universal approach to gay politics advocated in the West.

Finally, Lim brings us to *Go, or the Approximate Infinite Universe of Mrs. Robert Lomax*. This play continues the story of *The World of Suzie Wong* (directed by Richard Quine, 1960) but creates a queer storyline where Robert Lomax becomes a gay old man looking for gay young boys around Asia. Lomax represents rice queens who exoticize, romanticize, and beautify Asian boys. However, these Asian boys do not always submit to Lomax's desire. Lim points out that "Asia," as a unified concept, works only in relation to the "West." He advocates use of the plural form "Asias," which reflects the inherent inconsistency and conflicts within Asia.

If the model minority argument captures the image of Asians in the U.S. popular media, the "minor-native," a neologism coined by Lim in the concluding section, captures the representation of brown boys in these Asian performances. Minor-native is the intersecting occupation of the minority and native positions by Asian queer men. It is about the othering of Asian men in the dyad of colonial white man and exotic brown boy. Lim also emphasizes the geographical diversity of the brown boys, yet acknowledges their similar colonized histories. Thus, he proposes the notion of a "transcolonial borderzone," where, despite their different colonized histories, queers of color in the postcolonized places share similar affects toward their early colonizers.

Lim's analysis of the dyad stems from the perspectives of the colonizers: Spies, the Singaporean state, and Robert Lomax. In fact, the term "brown boys" implies a white male viewpoint. Where are the voices of the brown boys or Asian men? Nguyen Tan Hoang's ***A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*** provides an answer to this. Hoang offers a theory of



bottomhood. "Bottom," in gay culture, refers to the receptive partner in anal sex. The bottom sexual position is associated symbolically with submission, passivity, and the lack of agency. In the U.S. gay community, there is a widespread perception that, within a white-Asian dyad, the Asian partner usually takes up the submissive, bottom position in both social life and sexual practice. In this relationship, Asian men are considered less masculine and effeminate. This effeminacy equates to weakness and undesirability, as reflected by the rarity of Asian male actors in U.S. straight pornography. Bersani (1995) argues that being a bottom is a manifestation of the intense attachment to the phallic masculinity, while Dean (2009) suggests that, as a bottom, enduring the temporary pain is another way to prove one's masculinity. These two theoretical stances re-masculinize bottoming. However, as Hoang points out, this re-masculinization is done through marginalizing femininity.

Hoang argues that "male effeminacy" can be "socially and sexually enabling" (p. 2). Bottomhood does not simply mean taking up the bottom, passive, submissive identity or act; Hoang theorizes it as a position that is possible for creating political alliance among Asian men. This echoes with Lim's minor-narrative in the transcolonial borderzone. By analyzing the Asian figures in U.S. gay porn, Hollywood commercial cinema, French art cinema, and Asian diasporic experimental documentaries, Hoang offers a critique of the race, gender, sexuality, and nationality manifested in American visual cultures.

Hoang begins his analysis by looking at one of the rare Asian "top" performers in U.S. gay porn, Brandon Lee. Lee participated in several popular porn productions, where he played only the top role. Some critics see Lee's performances as a sign of politically progressive porn; Hoang disagrees. He points out that Lee's "topness" is at the cost of other Asians. In his performances, Lee speaks fluent English while his Asian bottom partners usually have a heavy accent. In this sense, Lee can be a top because of his assimilated Americanness. Moreover, Lee is not purely Asian. His real name is Jon Enriquez and he is of mixed Chinese, English, and Spanish ancestry. Therefore, his look is a bit westernized and his penis is bigger than that of the stereotypical Asian male. Lee left the porn industry in 1999 to serve in the U.S. Navy. In 2004, he returned to the industry with a more muscular body and played a bottom role in front of the camera for the first time. This significant shift may be a way to keep his audience's interests, but it also implies that Asianness and topness are incompatible. However, Hoang reminds us that Lee shows pleasure when being penetrated and feels empowered because he can stop the shooting process at any time (which is not always possible for a bottom in real sex life). This is the first case that demonstrates bottomhood can be pleasurable and empowering.

Hoang looks at the Hollywood movie *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (directed by John Huston, 1967). This film has a Filipino houseboy character called Anacleto. Anacleto is very close with his female master Alison, who has mental problems. Anacleto is a very feminine character. He acts in a camp way and dances spontaneously. He is very loyal to Alison, but that does not mean he is always submissive to her. He once expresses anger toward Alison when she lends him to another woman without asking his permission. Anacleto was played by Zorro David, a Filipino American, who was reported to be a

hairdresser in New York before the movie director “discovered” him. Huston said David’s personality fit naturally with Anacleto’s. However, as David’s performance reinforced the image of Filipino fag, he was criticized. Nevertheless, David expressed satisfaction about taking on the role and was happy that he could explore another career. In this light, bottomhood is not always detestable.

Hoang then moves on to a French art movie, *The Lovers* (directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1992). Bottomhood is not confined to gay or queer men; it can be found in heterosexual men as well. *The Lovers* is about a sexual relationship between a poor French girl and a rich Chinese man in Vietnam. This heterosexual story portrays the Chinese man as passive, weak, and unconfident. For example, his hand trembles when he tries to touch the girl’s hand. Hoang argues that it is their failure to live up to their respective standards (i.e., the French girl is poor and the Chinese man is not white) that connect the two. Hoang focuses his analysis on the sexual scenes where the Chinese man’s butt is exposed. Showing his butt but not his penis is partly because male frontal nudity could not be shown in the movie, but also because Asian penises are never seen in Western cinema. But Hoang provides a different reading of the scenes. He argues that the Chinese butt, in the sex scenes, signifies the social and sexual alliance (with the French girl) where one can find pleasure.

Finally, Hoang expands his inquiry into several experimental documentaries made by Asian diaspora filmmakers living in the United States. He is one of them. Hoang reports that in the gay Asian community in America, many men find dating another gay Asian man undesirable. These documentaries ask their viewers to consider the objectification and passivity of Asian men in these white-Asian relationships and encourage them to experience Asian-Asian relationships. In short, these documentaries call for political empowerment through being a “sticky rice” (an Asian gay man who loves Asians).

Hoang challenges conventional thinking, maintaining that being a bottom does not mean a total lack of power. His analysis highlights the pleasure of taking up the bottom and feminine position. This tactic is different from Bersani and Dean, who justify the existence of bottomhood by associating it to phallic worship and endurance. Yet, readers are reminded that Hoang does not mean bottomhood is all-powerful. Bottomhood at most is “a particular way of inhabiting an abject social-sexual-racial positioning situated in relation to other social-sexual-racial positions in a field of power and difference” (p. 195). In de Certeau’s term (1984), it is the tactics of the “weak.”

The two books not only provide thorough and nuanced analyses of a number of performances and movies, they also generate a new set of language for the discussion of Asian masculinity and queerness in popular culture. What can be further researched is how the multiplicities of Asia complicate this theorization. Lim and Hoang have not fully unpacked the diversity of “Asias.” For example, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Middle Eastern people and productions are completely ignored. Communication researchers who are interested in critical racial studies, cultural studies, and queer theory should find these books relevant and inspiring.

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