INTRODUCTION

Tropic Spells, Performance, and the Native Boy

A Preamble to a Spell

The thunderous applause at Brooklyn Academy of Music’s New Wave Festival opera A House in Bali (2010) reached an electric climax as the troupe of gamelan musicians and Balinese dancers filled the length of the stage. A House in Bali is based on a memoir of the same title published in 1947 by Colin McPhee, who is widely considered a progenitor of world music, particularly his transcription of Balinese ceremonial music for the piano.1 Written by the MIT music professor Evan Ziporyn in honor of McPhee and their shared (but separate) pilgrimages to Bali in 1981 and 1931, respectively, the opera featured a lattice-like intermingling of Balinese gamelan with twenty-first-century composition and technology. It was a “multimedia phantasmagoria of Eastern and Western music” with a hyperkinetic mix of Western opera, fusion rock-n-roll-meets-contemporary-classical strings, piano, guitar, and
percussion by a seven-member Bang on a Can All-Stars, a sixteen-member Balinese gamelan, and Balinese singers. Onstage, the mise-en-scène included a roving videographer feeding images in real time to two large screens atop the action juxtaposed with archival photography, while four principal dancers in the traditional mode were accompanied by live music. The excitement of this clangorous sonic and visual experimentation may be compared to the exclamation by McPhee’s character in the opera on first hearing the gamelan: “Listen to it! The confusion of sounds, jangled dissonance, merging to form constantly surprising harmonies in this absolute music.”  

While music played a big role in the show, the most fascinating discovery that evening for the audience was the character of Sampih, an eight-year-old Balinese dancing boy who was the love object of the thirty-one-year-old Canadian musician Colin McPhee. In fact, there was so much enthusiasm for him that the actor playing the part joined the curtain call to a literal gasp in the auditorium.

With the boy on center stage, the audience shot to their feet to affirm the Balinese collectively as the stars of the show rather than the three European opera leads—the actors playing Colin McPhee, the anthropologist Margaret Mead, and the painter Walter Spies—who had disappeared backstage. This was an uncanny moment: the boy had become a star, as he had in McPhee’s memoir when the Balinese dancers toured the United States and appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in New York City in 1952. The Balinese, indistinguishable as historic characters and actors onstage, seemed like a living flash/flesh from the past.

As the clapping turned manic, I joined the standing ovation with an apoplectic ambivalence that first seemed customary of middle-class theater etiquette, unsure if standing up was in fact a voluntary or compulsory act. My friend Tavia, whom I had convinced to see the show, clapped politely but would complain later that the New Wave Festival was increasingly pandering to the cosmopolitan multiculturalism of the Brooklyn art set. “I see what you mean now with the boy,” he said with his eyes widening. There was something palpably seductive and “wrong” about the spectacle to be clapping so hard, though I could not say what it was just yet; for the record, it has nothing to do with being a theater curmudgeon. I had rather enjoyed the show. So there we were
standing before the altar of the Western proscenium stage like adoring fans reliving the silvery rhythms of pure gamelan magic with the final treat of this intoxicating native tableau vivant. I couldn’t help clapping harder, maybe even tearing up a little, perhaps out of guilty pleasure or the sheer conceit that my book had just been given yet another staging. More than middle-class decorum or postcolonial sentiment, my ambivalence was taken over by a swirl of contradictory feelings. I was in fact fighting a possession: the ethno-visual splendor of brown bodies, male torsos, and costumes shimmering en masse under the floodlight with gamelan music in my head. I was spellbound and sick, euphoric and catatonic.

I have taught and written about the nativized spectacle and its sensory history for years, so I was surprised that its performatic logic and rapture were tangling before my eyes and in my body that evening over a Balinese dancing boy. If the audience saw the Balinese as the scopic, sonic, and sensual centerpiece of an opera that is ostensibly a multimedia phantasmagoria of Eastern and Western music, video, dance, and performance art, were they also applauding the love story between Sampih and Colin McPhee, the queer pedo-phantasmagoria at the heart of the opera? Could it be that the rush of “Bali high” from the 1930s channeled through Sampih was displaced on a spell so magical and addictive that its queer content was taken for granted and even celebrated at this 2010 cosmo-multicultural festival? Or was the queer content simply disavowed and evacuated for a mesmerizing Balinese experience, an experiential magic that we might also call the native burden of Asian theater traditions on the world stage? These questions engage and yet also exceed the matter of valorizing colonial exotica or the primitivist grid of contemporary performance in the West as echoed in such brilliant and now familiar indictments as “going primitive” (Marianna Torgovnick), “orientalist melancholia” (Rey Chow), and “imperialist nostalgia” (Renaldo Rosaldo). They point to and pivot on the open secret of the native boy, so feared and beloved in the opera and by the audience, as a minor figure dancing his way onto the world cultural stage. He is the disciplinary love object of colonialism and those who live by its shadows, identities, and myriad afterlives.

The Sampih-Colin pedo–love story is not exceptional, though rare in its extensive coverage of a single native boy’s identity. One need only
survey the life and work of André Gide, Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Lawrence Durrell, Gustave Flaubert, T. E. Lawrence, Edmund Backhouse, John Moray Stuart-Young, and E. M. Forster to find myriad examples of this coupling in the Western literary world. My main interest 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. In this regard, the space for debate is how “Asia,” to the extent that it is cast as an actual or conceptual native boy, is part of a pedophilic Western modernity bearing the homoerotics of orientalism. Moreover, how does Asian performance encode this colonial legacy or wrestle with the pedophilic tendencies of Western paternalism?

To be clear, this is neither an abolitionist project that seeks to free the boys from servitude or predation, nor a corrective to right the wrong done to subaltern boys by giving them a voice or future. Nor am I interested in the business of identifying colonial pedophiles in the style of the NBC series To Catch a Predator, or engaging the moral anxieties of the “good colonial versus bad colonial” dilemma that accompany defensive debates about the virtues of exceptional Europeans and Americans. The latter’s broader manifestation as an apologia for the U.S. nation-state, what many have rightly identified as American exceptionalism, is strikingly etched in the redemption narrative of Hollywood films like The Green Berets (1968). As is well known, the film ends with the American hero Colonel Kirby, played by John Wayne, comforting a helpless Vietnamese boy (“What happen to me now?”) crowned with a green beret as they walk holding hands along the beach in the sunset, with the promise of the colonel’s fatherly care and patronage (“You let me worry about that, Green Beret. You are what this is all about!”). I am clarifying what the book is not doing partly in response to the common charges raised by respondents at my lectures and partly to highlight how the disparities haunting the dyad also give credence to a West that has all the power vis-à-vis the helpless, nubile, innocent native boy. Moreover, in spite of the liberal, Western concern for the boy, the focus is invariably redirected back on the white man as the subject or main character, whether he is the complex genius and hero or whether he is even proximate to “the colonial condition.” Remarkably, the critical discourse would always eschew any significant study of homoeroticism as it pertains to the boys.
For instance, Joseph Boone’s important essay “Vacation Cruises; or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism,” as well as others, addresses the strictly European tourist who sexualized and romanticized boys in North Africa. This foundational essay offers a nuanced reading of T. E. Lawrence and other white male travelers in the “Sotadic zone” and is centered on the predicament of the white male “going native” over there in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Boone also interprets how these “spells” were conjured in major European novels. Historically speaking, the silent native boys are represented either as a curiosity, mystery, or source of fascination, their discursive absence or silence marked by their anonymous faces etched on paintings and photographs; their performance ephemera irrecoverable or sustained only in memory and oral transmissions. Even in leading gay novels, such as The Swimming Pool Library (1988), the depiction of African boys is deployed merely to enable the grace and virtuosity of the novelist. Studies such as Boone’s take a curatorial, literary approach to cultural artifacts that examines the role of the colonial writer but continues to ignore a study of the boy himself. I am interested in how “the homoerotics of orientalism” may be deployed to understand the representation of the boy.

In the case of Colin McPhee, the late musicologist Philip Brett notes that he is enjoying “a small revival as a result of art music’s unreflected admiration of Orientalism.” Hence, like the work of the (straight) minimalist composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass, the composer’s reflection is focused on the “degree of originality of the Occidental composer,” or his genius cross-cultural aesthetic. Unlike the politics of exploiting “a so-called primitive music,” McPhee is said to have incorporated in his most ambitious work, Tabuh-Tabuhan (1936), widely received as a transcription of the gamelan, “cross rhythms, irregular ostinatos, sectional structures, and layered textures” that had preexisted in his own work in the 1920s. The genius of McPhee is that he “did not simply tack on exotic effects,” and “met the East on its own terms.” The musicologist Carol Oja went as far as to say that Tabuh-Tabuhan “occupies a singular—even a leading—position within works of ethnic inspiration as well as the whole of twentieth century American music.” But, for McPhee, meeting the “East on its own terms” or finding with Balinese music and its people “an empathy that was extraordinary” was not merely a musical affair. It also involved Sampih as muse, son, adoptee, houseboy,
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trophy dancer, and lover, a matter that Oja hints at ever so coyly. Consider the differing accounts of the original encounter between Sampih and McPhee by Oja and McPhee, respectively:

Sampih was a child of about eight when McPhee first met him in 1932 while the house was being built. As McPhee tells the story, one day he walked down to the river below his house and was suddenly caught in a flash flood. Sampih saw him struggling, leaped in, and led him to safety. The two struck up a tentative friendship, and soon Sampih was stopping frequently at the McPhee house. Eventually he came there to live. McPhee probably never adopted Sampih officially. In A House in Bali he does not use the term “adoption,” although he talks of custody negotiations with the child’s parents. Katherine Mershon also took in a boy; hers was named Murda. She has claimed she paid Murda’s family about a dollar a month so she could keep the child.14

One afternoon I had gone down the hillside to the river and waded to the other side to walk along the edge of the rice fields . . . a few yards above the level of the water. A crowd of small boys splashed in midstream, leaping from rock to rock. Their wet brown skins shone in the sun as they danced up and down in the ecstasy of nakedness. They were completely wild, agile, and delirious as a treeful of monkeys . . . while I was walking along the river’s edge . . . one of these floods occurred . . . I soon found myself in deep water where the current was far too strong. The children shouted excited directions from the shore, but I could not hear what they were saying. It was then that one of the more boisterous, one whom I had already noticed as the leading spirit, threw himself in to the water, swam to a boulder and jumped over to where I was struggling. He knew every shallow and hollow in the river bed, for he quickly led me ashore . . . When we reached land this naked, dripping youngster and I stood facing one another. He was perhaps eight, underfed and skimpy, with eyes too large for his face, daring and slightly mocking. I offered him a cigarette, but he suddenly took fright and was off into the water before I could say a word.15

The metaphor of the phallic cigarette that frightened poor Sampih is a subtle sexual reference in McPhee’s alternately pornographic and
loving gaze about his first encounter with him. Details of the Balinese boys as a “treeful of monkeys” dancing in “the ecstasy of nakedness” articulate a queer vision that is rampant in the era’s colonial postcards and photography. Like it or not, the eloquence of his desire for Sampih and the boys is part of the memoir’s appeal that has also made it a must-read for those purportedly interested in the structure and sound of Balinese gamelan music. In this regard, Oja’s dry codification or denial of the encounter’s homoerotics, calling the Sampih-Colin relationship a “tentative friendship,” seems rather disingenuous. She has in fact read McPhee’s memoir but chooses to highlight the common practice of recruiting houseboys instead, noting that his heterosexual dancer friend Katherine Mershon also “took in a Balinese boy.” While we may speculate on Oja’s disinterest in bringing out the queer erotics of the encounter, we might also point out what is obvious: the colonial dyad is at once identified and disavowed for a narrative focus on Colin McPhee as the subject, and Sampih as the object. Similarly, the opera skirts the issue by vaguely acknowledging the centrality of Sampih’s role in McPhee’s story of personal and artistic transformation in Bali. It went as far as to suggest that his fixation on this beautiful dancing boy was more than a matter of discovering and nurturing local talent, but does not ever develop its queer subtext. As a disgruntled review notes, “it’s like a coming-out story in which nobody ever really comes out.”

The historical narrative dictates that Sampih’s fame and even existence as a dancer hinge on McPhee’s patronage and life story, neatly catalogued in the archives at UCLA’s ethnomusicology collection. Though Sampih’s story meets with the requisite tragic end for the native boy (he was brutally murdered at age twenty-eight in 1954)—he is at the very least known by his first name. This is in contradistinction to countless other boys who remain nameless and anonymous even as they are photographed, written about, or endlessly reproduced as a trope. The term “native boy” refers both to minors like Sampih and to nativized men who are treated as less than adults. This rampant form of racialization resonates with various official discourses that infantilize gay men as no more than boys even as “boys” remains a popular term of endearment in gay circles. These blurring lines of the term index the problematic that attends each inquiry and encounter about the queer dyad that is the white man/native boy.
Paradigm

*Brown Boys and Rice Queens* proposes that while orientalist dyadic formations are chronic and persistent in twentieth- and twenty-first-century intercultural encounters, queer couplings such as the white man/native boy remain under the critical radar in spite of their prevalence. This queer dyad is, to put it facetiously, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The book begins by asking why this has been the case, and then performs a comparative study of this queer coupling as a primary object of performance history and analysis. Three sites configure a mapping of circum-Pacific performance in the Asias: Bali, Singapore, and the United States. This study will argue that an understanding of Asian encounters in a colonial-transnational frame is not merely incomplete but lacking in its central substance if it does not take account of queer couplings exemplified by the white man/native boy’s conceptual, historical, and sexual couplings. It will assume that this dyad and its cognate formations must be rendered a commensurate visibility in critical studies of performance, theater, and culture, whether as a queer epistememe or a colonial one, or both, intertwined throughout the encounter. Such a wager considers queerness and a perverse love for the Asian boy as central to traditional and transnational epistemologies of “Asian performance.”

The historical dimension of this gambit is based on a set of dichotomies. In the classic colonial/native encounter of post-Enlightenment modernity, the purchase of Western power is accepted as a matter of intelligibility. The perception and interpretation of that encounter is organized through the Western perspective. It is a dyadic structure that organizes an uneven distribution of power through paradigms that are both colonial and gendered, focused on both labor and seduction. The colonial man inscribes, reasons, and directs the encounter with singular finesse, while the nativized objects appear as dancing, laboring, grumbling, and seducing. While the colonial subject is imbued with gravitas and mobility, the nativized object is made to seem infantile, tricky, and bound by tradition. The subject inspires a biography, while the object disappears into a mob; the subject is rational and distinguished, the object remains erratic and mysterious. These performative iterations and their requisite affects are regulated by an age-old orientalist logic.
whose most familiar dyadic formation is also a gendered one: the colonial is a white man and the “native” is a brown woman. In the Western canon, the familiar image of the lovelorn female Asiatic woman has been immortalized in Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, or she appears as a hypersexual prostitute, as in *Miss Saigon*. In the social imaginary, she is the tragic Indian *sati* widow, and the oppressed Afghan woman in burka. All of these images are set in narratives in which the iconic native woman is to be loved or saved by the white man. They compose the colonial deployment of East-West relations as heteronormative in structure. The uneven distribution of power is mobilized by codes of masculinity and femininity.

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 simply missing from the archives. In this work, the focus brings the erratic sightings of the nativized boy from the backdrop, or the wings, to the foreground, using as its material the incandescent realms of theater and social production, narrativized fictions, filmic recordings, and the queer “porno-tropics” of the global arena. The variability of these sightings constitutes a broad spectrum of types and sites. He is, for instance, the possessed Balinese dancing boy in colonial photography; the faceless victim of child sex tourism in Southeast Asia; one in a mob of cannibalistic brown boys in Tennessee Williams’s *Suddenly Last Summer* or in the non-cannibalistic mob in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. But beyond identifying these images, the study seeks to interpret their significance and connection. The book reads the native boy as a figurative consignment of colonial modernity, at once the love child of predatory capitalism, queer orientalism, and the white male artist-tourist on the casual prowl for inspiration and sex. In one regard, the native boy is a sign of conquest, the trope of an Asian male or nation infantilized as a boy, a savage domesticated as a child, and a racially alienating body in need of tutelage and discipline.

Paired with a white man, the allegorical figure of colonialism, the dyad enters the discourse of colonial piety and subjugation with various anxieties, chief of which is racial and (homo)sexual panic. The boy’s homologous manifestations, located in the three chosen sites (Bali, Singapore, Asian America), signify a transnational formation across the colonial time-space of the last century where his body is passed from
Assemblies of Interpretation

By way of introduction to the full study of the paradigm I have developed above, I want to briefly address the critical paradox of the colonial dyad and the native boy (both as a part of and apart from the dyad) that resides within queer inquiries by formulating a number of axioms, conceptual rearrangements, and critical interventions around “Asian performance.” The sections in this introduction propose a consortium of tools, texts, terms, and maps to think through the site and surround of Asian encounters in a transnational complex. They consolidate the book’s critical hedges in theater and performance studies as its primary cross-fields while engaging queer and global studies, postcolonial and ethnic studies, and Asian, Asian American, and American studies (what I shall henceforth refer to as Asian/American studies) to elucidate every encounter. They serve as a signpost of ideas rather than an end point, and a way to navigate the transnational and sometimes unruly itinerary throughout the book, including “queer f(r)ictions,” “bringing out tropic spells,” “glocalqueering native boys,” “butterflies gone berserk,” “transcolonial borderzones,” “epistemology of minor-native,” “dyadic performativity,” “G.A.P. (Gay Asian Princess) drama,” “performance in the Asias,” and “ethnic camp.” The plurality is meant to trouble the ascribed unidirectionality of critical and complicit energies and logics that often
accompany the provenance of “Asia” as a stable and static category in twentieth-century area and theater studies.

Bali, Singapore, and Asian America organize a configuration of the queer Asias predicated on the material and historical particularities of their performance cultures, and each is treated in separate chapters. Anchoring this study is the Balinese kecak, Singaporean gay theater in English, and Asian American performance art. The legacy of colonialism hovers over the broader argument describing all the chapters together, haunting the contemporary postcolonial queer Asian (both queer and female examples included) in ways best analyzed through performance. While each chapter may be read as dealing with what is prototypically colonial (Bali circa 1900-1942), postcolonial (Singapore, 1990-2010), and diasporic (Asian America, 1990-2010), the theater and performance forms I examine both address and exceed each designation when read through the consortium of critical formulations that relate Asian encounters to transnational queer performance. The three sites are explicitly connected in a transnational and transcolonial complex where colonialism and its legacies manifest in ways that exceed or deform conventional hierarchies of national and colonial time-space with queer couplings, turns, and feelings. That is, they involve a turn from the enforcement of top-down/bottom-up to the artifice of same-sex top/bottom, or the facetious substitution of “East gone rogue, gone missing” for the West-to-East or East-to-West model of exchange. Theater and performance are ideal for staging this complex while being a part of its very constitution. Its sensate acuity for people rubbing against each other (in all manner of speaking), speculations of actor agency, and critical (de-/re-)composition of reality are all crucial for shoring up the conditions of possibility for the native boy. A centerpiece of this complex fiction is thus the boy himself, including his movement, action, and affect vis-à-vis the desiring white male gaze in different locations, bodies, and guises.

Whether he is performing for the postcolonial father-state, the United States, the white daddy, the impresario of ethnic drag, or the Western theater director, the boy brings to bear the historical valences of an originary colonial encounter as well as the queer and racial legibilities and deformities that attend to his role-play, erotic identification,
and figurative power. The book conjures the dyad as constituted by the complex and multidirectional desires and resistances that are deployed to fuel the colonial and postcolonial encounters between the West and the Asias. It makes provisions for a spectrum of feelings and histories that may or may not be commensurate with official or unofficial accounts about the boy or the dyad. Understanding the native boy in multiple contexts is therefore crucial to the erotohistoriography of performance traditions in the Asias, and each given site demands a particular assembly of critical tools and reference points.

Read together, these performances, situated within their individuated sites, animate the stakes of queer Asian/colonial encounters across spaces and temporalities gauged by transnational processes. My hope is that different contingencies and combinations of Asian encounters and queerness could be activated around the shifting set of concerns, outlooks, and issues that these performances prompt. Let’s turn to one assembly of these modes of interpretation.

Queer F(r)ictions

The transnational vectors I have in mind in this section proceed from two major points of departure whose critical trajectories have for the most part and until recently run on parallel tracks. The first point of departure is derived primarily from U.S. queer of color critiques and Australian AsiaPacifiQueer studies, what we might call as a shorthand, Asian/Pacific/American (A/P/A) performance epistemologies. The other major vector proceeds from notions of postcolonial queerness that link directly to multinational identifications and the comparative histories of Asian performance in American understandings of race and sexuality. The implicit backdrop for this vector is the rise of global Asia and the return or transmigration of Asian American artist-scholars to China, India, and Southeast Asia. Thus, the first point of departure organizes an Asian identification within national and regional boundaries, such as American, or Australian, or Pacific Island, and the second point of departure takes the global Asia as its starting point. The fact that these critiques run on parallel rather than shared tracks creates something like a bipolar condition, with varying effects, including a methodological impasse or critical blind spot.
Rather than privileging one of these approaches over the other, I want to regard their convergences and collisions as transnational f(r)ictions. By “f(r)ictions,” I have in mind the anthropologist Anna Tsing’s notion of “friction,” which brings out the “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” through the “sticky materiality of practical encounters” around the world. This is a way of refusing dominant myths such as the singular discourse on—or what Tsing calls the lie of—“global power as a well-oiled machine.” Rather, it provides critical traction for minor scales in the grip of worldly encounters, or frictions produced by people (including those other than the usual suspects) with varying agendas and desires rubbing up against each other. The rhetoric and methodology of Tsing’s friction reconfigure how universal terms are often only seen as being rearticulated in the local idiom from a top-down direction when both (universal/local, dominant/other) are always mutually constitutive in “zones of awkward engagement”; one changes over place and time through contact, and the other stakes out claims beyond its locality.

I want to bring this idea together with the collective theorizations of scholars whose queer and women of color critiques uncover the “fictions” within “the ruptural components of culture” such as “the restrictions of universality, the exploitations of capital, and the deceptions of national culture.” In this regard, we might follow the leads of its theorists to say that queer f(r)ictions are a way to track the unpredictable connectivity of the queer dyad, or the “heat” of its tropes, across the multiple scales and interfaces of the postcolonial/diaspora, native/ethnic, Asia/America animating all Asian encounters in performance. These disarticulations of entrenched coherencies are a move to see opposing fictions and fabrications in action, or the inherently dramatic force driving the performance of queer f(r)ictions. They have several implications for reading the native boy as the other half of the dyad whose “new” visibility is based on uncovering different histories and conditioned agencies in performance that would also mark the disunity and instability of the dyad’s dominant fictions.

For one, they carry stories of hope and dissension that “rub” against each other with complex transformations in the subjectivity and politics of those who care about the potential of queer acts to imagine otherwise. Trouble or pleasure, queer f(r)ictions are crucial for interrogating all
the explosive issues accompanying the native boy’s presence, whether as a queer episteme, critical affect, performance conundrum, or historical trace. These involve various queer couplings, romances, and disputes wherever the two (colonial/native, white/ethnic, poco-daddy/cosmo-homo, patriarch/boy, rice queen/Asian houseboy) may meet. While the focus at each geographic location is on different versions of the native boy, the objective is not to present a homology or taxonomy of boys tied neatly to colonial, national, and diasporic predicaments. Rather, queer f(r)ictions facilitate a comparative spatial study, what I call a transcolonial borderzone, of different Asian encounters with an eye toward a different outcome than simple negation or negativity. It engages the hope in José Muñoz’s conception of queerness as “essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence or concrete possibility for another world.” Such cruisings, to intermix Muñoz’s and Tsing’s critical heed, involve a staggering range of people, places, and performances that are brought into the fray of frictive and fictional contact onstage, in everyday life, and in imagined futures.

Additionally, the question of scale around each encounter with the native boy calibrates a different set of Asian encounters based on the queer congeries of local/global, local/regional interactions. These are attuned to native self-invention vis-à-vis colonial spells of difference in Bali, postcolonial state policies around pink capitalism in Singapore, and U.S. imperial histories in Asian America and the Asian diaspora. Hence, he is simultaneously the one to be tutored and disciplined by the white daddy, a trope for the racial minority in colonial and postcolonial Asia and the United States, and the one to be saved in the global proliferation of rights-based Western lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity movements in Third World countries. Each of these salvific and disciplinary encounters with the Asian boy in theater and performance as well as their surround is an opportunity for understanding the liberal (and false) apology for U.S. colonial management and neoliberal triumphalism in or on Asia, and the effects of that history on Asian/America. A way to make sense of all these variable Asian encounters, that is, the boy as a trope of Asian performance or a native of the Euro-American tropics, is through a critical formulation that I am calling the “tropic spell.”
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Bringing Out the Tropic Spell

From a lexical perspective, a spell originally meant a “narration,” which gives a discursive structure to its current popular meaning as “a form of words used as a magical charm or incantation.” A spell is also an exemplary performative as words that not only do things but perform the act of doing things: it can quite literally conjure things into being with the right organization of words and conditions. In spite of these structures, much like theater or dance-drama, its effects are not always predictable with bodies in motion. In fact, a spell is never able to fully determine how subjects think, produce, consume, feel, or act. Besides, there are all kinds of unplanned effects during such an encounter, contingent upon the spell’s duration, histories of the space in which the encounter occurs, the actors’ bodies, loose affects, secretions, the labor of production teams, and how others see or interpret what is taking place.

Brown Boys and Rice Queens asks why performances produced from or read through Asian encounters and dyadic couplings have such allure or magic; why global queer theater and racial performance are or seem to be easily given to their spellbinding scenarios. Such an approach opens up a space for an explicit play with the requisite affect, speech, and identifications of the dyad as well as the design, casting, and history of each Asian encounter. These are all basic inquiries of performance analysis but also fundamental components of a tropic spell. There is nothing “natural” about a white man/native boy pairing. Its legitimacy or legibility is contingent on the naturalization of the other’s performative attributes. Hence, the point of my staging the Asian encounter is not to look at a spell as simply that which is cast by one over the other, or on us as readers and spectators. Rather, it is to understand how the spells are mutually constitutive in performance as a technology of representation and sustainable across a web of relationalities, including other dyads, triads, communities, and so forth. This is a gambit for configuring a range of critical reading practices about performance in the queer Asia. I am not interested in a nomothetic and singular notion of Asia or naturalized connections of bodies to space, time, and bodily regimes of action. Bringing out the tropic spell of the colonial imaginary begins
to denaturalize the dyad as well as Asian performance as a queer design with many faces.

Performance is crucial for understanding the spell of the dyad as that which gives Asian encounters and other hegemonic cultural conventions their appeal and durability. By performance, I mean to invoke its variegated and contested meanings as an embodied practice, critical trope, and interpretive methodology with an eye toward bridging “segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry.” As Dwight Conquer-good argues, such an approach models a radical research agenda that attends to the “epistemic violence” of scriptocentric Western regimes of knowing by procuring minor performance knowledges that are “tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert.” The burgeoning field of transnational theater studies, a cognate of performance studies in an ever-changing cross-field, is also crucial in this critical venture. Together, they turn a critical eye on the blind spots of dominant epistemologies stuck in colonial (straight white male) ocular-centrism, print-based literacy, and self-legitimating productions. In this regard, both theater and performance are particularly suited to examining the dyad’s queerness as a mode of subjugated, covert, and “illegitimate” form of living.

The queer intelligibility of a colonial scenario is both performative and allegorical. The performativity of the dyad’s queer coupling requires that the native boy corporealize the elements of the fantasmic power relationship. His performance is an embodiment of the flexible genders (more often feminine) and exotic magic assigned to Asia. Unlike the native girl, he is perceived as either male or female, a double-faced agent who performs modern feelings but acts in familiar traditions. The boy is nativized by virtue of precisely his “boyish” aspect, his seeming underdevelopment of secondary sexual characteristics, his smaller size, and his propensity for graceful, “primitive” ways. Toward this curious object, the white man feels lovesick, possessed, and paternalistic. He has fallen for the spells cast by the West, even as the magic appears to emanate naturally from the boy’s nativized and flexibly gendered body.

The hyperbolic emotional and sexual affect of this Asian encounter is registered in the scenario, to use Diana Taylor’s term, of colonial-orientalist encounters, and sets up a queer account of the racialized
subjectivities they produce. At stake in such a scenario of global encounters is the way that the corporeal imaginary and its performance can theatricalize the queer and nativized effect enforced or naturalized as a matter of the uneven distribution of power. Describing the dyad’s differential manifestations in/as performance not only serves to display the ways power is imagined as corporeal and seductive, but also serves to create an interface with performance traditions along the global crossings in the Asias with resonant particularities at each site. It attunes us to the “other” traditions of corporeality, theater, and performance that play alongside, against, and with the colonial scenario. Together, and apart, these performances stage this open secret of queer couplings at once dirty and tender, patronizing and enabling, real and fantastic, which continues to condition transnational queer performance across time and space.

In the first chapter of the book, I take a close look at the Balinese kecak as a prime example of the tropic spell. Kecak is often performed with traditions of ritual possession (Sanghyang) from which it is derived in nightly tourist shows at Ubud, Bali, to conjure an “ancient tribal hypnosis.” More strikingly, its adapted, current choreography may be understood through the classic white man/native boy dyad put in place by the German expatriate artist Walter Spies. Spies was instrumental in this adaptation based on his love for the Balinese brown boys, who portray the Ramayana monkeys within the spectacle. Although the monkey is a god in the story, the agile, playful, and yet also threatening portraits the boys enact are at once youthful, seductive, and threateningly elusive. In his daily life, Spies employed a host of nameless boys who served as his houseboys, models, lovers, and inspiration during the interwar years of the twentieth century, when Spies and a queer enclave of Western transplants made Bali their home. The seduction of the brown boy theatricalized in the ritual’s polyrhythmic gyrations and cacophonous chants is an explosive, open secret whenever Spies is invoked as a cocreator in its history of development. Its intractable and “invisible” queerness sounds off the problematics of authenticity in traditional Asian ritual forms whose preservation and evolution in the past century are tied to a violent colonial history. Not only is this history of the development of kecak elided, its subsequent academic and historiographic representation by both Western and Balinese scholars have actively sought to marginalize
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or invalidate the troubling queerness at the origin of the form’s “revival.” But the queer encounter of Spies and the boys is part of the Balinese paradisal idyll, a discursive invention of the Dutch colonials who also made Spies a famous “victim” of their raids against buggers and sodomites. The aesthetic success of such a queer dyad suggests that the man/boy coupling is constitutive rather than deformative of the colonial scenario.

Contemporary criticism of Balinese dance forms attributes a rather patriarchal neutrality and authority to Spies, who is said to have saved Balinese “native” performance, in adapting it for consumption by tourists. Yet Spies actually knew very little about the originary status of the performers and the performance. Spies may have been the creator of the conceit of performing possession, of playing possession for the Western anthropological gaze—what some scholars have provocatively called ethnopornography. Likewise, Spies’s “ethnophotography” stages the languid gaze, entranced posture, and wry smile of both Spies and “the boys,” who appear to be in on the joke about their queer masquerade. But the scholarship is nearly silent on this Asian encounter due to either structural conditions of the archive or a lack of desire, casting a pall over the historical texture of the Balinese performers or the material conditions for their reengagement of kecak.

I bring up the example of Spies (which I examine more extensively in chapter 1) to illustrate the practical workings of the tropic spell. Spies represented this spell in his life filled with Balinese “boy” lovers, in his re-creation of them in the choreography of the kecak, and in his ethnophotography. I am interested in how his biography and work suggest a shifting range of mutually constitutive queer fantasies that motivate conflicting claims and disavowals around its cultural ownership or co-optation, and how we might use the tropic spells found therein to theorize transnational queer performance. I do not mean to suggest that the Balinese men who were involved with Spies, as lovers and as performers, were simply objects of his gaze and his affections. The seduction of the tropic spell is not simply the invention of a colonial individual, but a condition within which the queer coupling found a seductive scenario to play. As Spies illustrates, tropic spells are both identitarian or social positions and theatrical, aestheticized conceits.

Tropic spells are at once colonial and postcolonial in their effects and tricks, and they demand a range of queer reading practices attuned to
the dyad's critical and complicit orientalist formations. In my analyses, I will use contrapuntal (in Said's sense) interplay between sometimes discrepant and sometimes mutually constitutive visions, worldviews, or experiences of both the (former) colonizer and (formerly) colonized. The point is to not singularize one or the other subject position—white man or native boy, colonizer or colonized—but to approach it as a dyadic formation that takes into account “both the metropolitan history that is narrated and . . . those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.” The dyad is, in other words, mutually constitutive, and the spells are cast in both directions.

Bringing out tropic spells as theatrical conceits or performance in(ter)ventions is a way to make legible, audible, and palpable the shifting temporal and spatial positioning of the “Asian” subject in various performative genres. When the queer exigencies of various Asian subjects, performances, and discourses are carefully limned, the stereotypical rendering of the white man/native boy dyad is also being actively decomposed. This is in contrast to the way some have written about the disciplinary technology of colonial “tender violence” where the assumptions are primarily based on an ocular fetishization of the native as at once sexual, primitive, and modernizable. Little has been said about how the panic of otherness is sublimated in professions of love that vacillate between romance and patronage, care and surveillance, through queer, dyadic formations. These affective polarizations attract and repel one from the other endlessly in a tricky relationship. It is a relationship that takes on multiple guises around the world, pointing to a confluence of queer connections and unspeakable possessions from the colonial past to the transnational present. Such giddy guises and codependencies open a new set of questions about the role of queerness in colonial (re)formations and orientalist legacies in Asian performance, and how Asian encounters inflect transnational queer performance (or vice versa). As a flexible allegory, the dyad is not confined to the colonial scenario per se but key to understanding various ethnic and queer (de) formations in transnational worlds wherever the East and West have intermingled, including postcolonial and postwar contexts.

The mutuality of the queer dyad of man/boy may be within, but is clearly different from, the dominant reception of the East as infantilized.
A comparison of Spies’s aesthetic with the familiar image of General Douglas MacArthur screwing up a Japanese boy toy could help illustrate what I mean. Allegorizing U.S.-Japan relations after the war, MacArthur’s characterization of postwar Japan as “a boy of 12” relative to the Anglo-Saxon, who was, “say 45 years of age in development in the sciences, the arts, divinity, culture” is an unvarnished reference to the unqueer, nonconsensual white man/boy dyad.33 Defeated, the Japanese were represented as children, made pliable and teachable, justifying the Occupation. Occupation is more brutal, more authoritarian, and more nationalist than the tropic spell. It also moves the boy toward the eventual payoff of occupation: the Japanese “boy” will mature into the Westernized man, and take on “the responsibilities and privileges of an advanced society.”34

As is clear, this particular iteration of the native boy as “impressionable, vulnerable Japanese ‘children’” is an assertion by Americans and Europeans who saw “something immature and undeveloped about the ‘small’ Japanese and their ‘toylike’ nation.”35 The MacArthur-Japanese boy doll encounter is thus ensconced in the subject-object designation of white man/native boy with no escape for the joyless Japanese “kid” in a heterorientalist framework, an update of the Pinkerton-Japanese bastard child. While we may queer the conventional sexual metaphors of this conquest scenario, it is not queerness but a violent homoeroticism that is at the heart of the image’s racist paternalism. This accounts for the structure of legibility predicated on the “truth” of Japan as a machinic doll and the West as a manly officer in charge. I want to stress that this operates differently than the “magic” of tropic spells I have in mind, where racial fascination and queer affection are mixed with bewitching scenes of seduction from both sides even where cross-cultural understanding ultimately fails. But these performative positions, the interplay between exploitation and patronage, subterfuge and romance, suggest that the dyad is constantly negotiating the effects of its own spells. Yet such queer distillations of orientalism in the Asias are rendered with a set of affects that must feel like orientalist déjà vu, from the joyful nativization or racialized sufferings of the boy to the loving patronage and knowing paternalism of the colonial. These affective registers are generated in tandem with the dyad’s binaries—white/brown, man/boy, rational/exotic, clean/dirty, First World/Third World—accompanying contemporary spells of difference.
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Placing the Asian boy at the center of the colonial/native imaginary means that the dyad’s encounters also become key to understanding performance in the queer Asias. The dyad’s spells are ultimately uncontrollable because it has perennial tropic heat, in the sense that its tropes and body logics continue to be pervasive and naturalized in the pornotropics of the Asias. But performance is well situated to play with its magic. It would require that the native boy come out as a critical subject on the transnational stage with his white male other (in hand or absent) in a dyadic but not necessarily committal relationship.

Dyadic Performativity, or Butterflies Gone Berserk

As I have illustrated in the Spies example, the history of such encounters is crucial in transnational configurations that push against the contours of accepted cultural logics and histories about Southeast Asia. That is, they interrogate how “Asian performance,” both as a theatrical genre and as an encounter, is also a queer transcultural amalgam. “Tradition,” in this regard, has to be viewed as an evolving form that exceeds discrete national history and identity. Just as there is not one unchanging tradition, there is not one native boy. He has to be understood within the logics and structure of specific colonial, national, and diasporic projects and their relational affinities. The multiple histories, memories, and desires of these intersecting projects bind his coherency and incoherency to a politics of recognition—Who is the native boy? How is he recognizable? What is his story? Why should we care?

In American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America (2006), Allan Punzalan Isaac argues that the “enigmatic unrecognizability” of the gay biracial Filipino American killer Andrew Cunanan, best remembered for the 1997 murder of Gianni Versace, is part of his figuration as a native boy. Isaac argues that his unrecognizability is part of a U.S. “imperial grammar” with “blind limits of the U.S. racial imaginary and its misreading and incomprehension of its imperial history.” Hence, the suicide gunshot that completely disfigured Cunanan’s face indexes how he was figuratively and literally unintelligible to the U.S. public as an American citizen of Filipino descent. This violent forgetting or cultural amnesia is also tied to an “American dis-ease with homosexuality,” which manifested through the media’s salacious obsession with the
frenzied “gay underground.”37 This paradox, of forgetting and obsessing, of disavowal and knowledge, is symptomatic of a central anxiety around the white man/native boy dyad—the danger of homosexuality and racialized depravity—that conflates sexual and racial otherness.

For the U.S. public, the lasting image of this story is Cunanan’s mangled body in a pool of blood on a gleaming white houseboat. This violent clash of colors, one in which the “glaring, if not blinding, whiteness” obscures all else, adds to a long list of poetic fatal endings for the native boy.38 The “grammatical structure” of recognizability in this sensational case is also a theatrical one, staging Cunanan as the “shapeshifting Filipino rent boy” of the national media, and the “altar boy” of U.S.-Filipino immigration and Catholic mythos. These different media viewing points incite more questions graphing the historic and psychic links in the Asias: Is Cunanan’s case an American story? Is it a Filipino story? Is it a Filipino American story? Is it a tragic “gay” story? Or is it all of the above, marked with traces of America’s empire?

The dyad is embedded in these questions through a set of tropic scenarios in which Cunanan as Filipino “rent boy” and “altar boy” is vividly set against the white American star (Versace) and the pope or father figure. The story of this Filipino boy is, in other words, part of a historically specific instantiation of the dyad tied to U.S. imperialism, proselytization, and the colonial management of Filipino American masculinity. He is thus framed around a particular set of racial and heterosexual panics involving the “secret” histories of an unrecognizable gay Filipino other within the borders of the United States. Cunanan represents a terrifying racial allegory of gay Asians in the diaspora who fail to assimilate into Western society. But rather than using Cunanan to naturalize the narrative of the native boy’s “pathology,” we might consider the case in relation to dramatic representations of gay Asians in Asian/America. David H. Hwang’s M. Butterfly (which I will read in chapter 3) and Chay Yew’s Porcelain (1992) are key examples that bring out what I am calling the drama of butterflies gone berserk.

Yew’s play concerns the psyche of a nineteen-year-old Anglo-Chinese student, John Lee, who commits a crime of passion after discovering his older male lover, Will Hope, “cottaging” with other men.39 Written as a chamber play and framed around a set of interweaving interviews with a court-appointed criminal psychologist, a priest, a reporter, and
others, the play presents Lee as a lone character onstage responding to four disembodied voices that represent each of the aforesaid roles. The voices also produce other soundscapes such as the streets of London. Based on salacious tabloid headlines around the entrapment of gay men who have public sex in the toilets of East London, *Porcelain* is at once fictional and ethnographic, invoking the blurry and risky boundaries of gay desire/internalized homophobia and obsession/love. It plays with the orientalist premise of queer encounters organized by the dyad by inverting the expectations one may have about each position. Within the dyadic structure, John Lee is the native boy from Hong Kong whose immigrant parents speak little English. But he is the protagonist who has a multifaceted psyche, a racially ambiguous name that could pass as British, and a future as a Cambridge-bound scholar. In contrast, Will Hope is, as the auxiliary verb in his name suggests, only disposed to something like the feeling that what is wanted can be had. He is working-class and married, and has stereotypical taste (his favorite opera is *Madame Butterfly*). In spite of the reversal of fortune, the spell of orientalist intoxication is indexed by the pathology or predilection of both characters, though Lee bears the burden as the murderer hearing all kinds of voices in his head. This is an interesting comparison to *M. Butterfly*, where the central character, the French diplomat René Gallimard, is also in an incarceral space, both physical and psychic, as he tells his enchanted story through flashbacks. Both Lee and Gallimard are differentially possessed and pathologized but undeniably taken by the dyad's spells.

Similarly, the “Balinese light youth,” the Thai go-go boy dancer, and the Chinese Mardi Gras boy in Singapore have their own sets of spells. To confront each tropic spell, rather than to be taken by it, one has to consider how the native boy’s theatricality is contingent upon the seamless reiteration of various truth-effects, tropes, enactments, and embodiments organizing “the way things are” in the empire. I have in mind the Dutch, British, and U.S.-American empires in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The “set pattern of behavior or action” of native boys in the empire or after-empire is in this regard the effect of a regulatory order naturalizing particular racial and erotic expectations. It reiterates what has been taken for granted in terms of how queer and racialized subjects (should, might, or ought to) act, desire, and speak
in the face of whiteness; and how colonial figures assume particular entitlements or privileges around how they act, desire, and speak with the nativized. Those who are infantilized as Asian boys, for instance, are part of the lineage of the perverse, primitive other successfully tamed by and displayed for Western modernity. This is the classic underpinning of racial performativity in the West.

It bears note, then, that the colonial dyad, let alone the boy, continues to be explicitly disavowed or disallowed as a queer formation with significant histories and stakes in performance across the Asias. This has sometimes enforced their absence, erasure, or unreadability in the institutional archive as well as in artistic practice. Buggery with male natives, for instance, is considered such a threat that colonial penal codes against sodomy were introduced in all the British colonies. Notably, lesbian sex or the white female/native female coupling has no such provisions in the statutes. Such a female queer coupling is deemed either impossible or simply insignificant in the colonial Victorian mindset. However, the specificity of directives against the male-male dyad suggests the undue potency of queer couplings involving the native boy who as a boy is potentially disruptive of the dominant colonial imaginary of Asia as a woman, and yet also crucial for consolidating the same imaginary as the perverse other—a boy who is or acts like a girl.

The anthropological dimensions of this colonial history mean that Eurocentric notions of Asianness often overdetermine actual encounters with Asians, including many contemporary Asian encounters. As James Moy notes, “the notion of Chineseness under the sign of exotic became familiar to the American spectator long before sightings of the actual Chinese.” The ambiguity around who might be “the actual Chinese” is tied to a racialized curiosity around who is a real “native” in the West. Hence, the “freakish” spectacle of a “Chinese lady,” Afong Moy, at the American museum in New York City in 1834 resonates with how Goldie Cheung, a forty-eight-year-old Hong Kong immigrant in the United Kingdom, was sensationalized as a hypersexual Chinese contestant on the British television show X Factor in 2011. Their common “foreignness” was deemed sufficient novelty for visual entertainment, but Cheung had to be more than just a passive Chinese body on display. Auditioning for a spot on the popular series, she was singled out for her outlandish racial burlesque, singing and dancing as if she were a new
Suzie Wong on the loose one week, and a female Chinese minstrel show in Tina Turner drag another week. Her native boy counterpart is William Hung, the Chinese American student (also from Hong Kong originally) whose off-key and off-rhythm audition on the 2004 *American Idol* went instantly viral on the Internet. Hung was widely embraced as a racial joke with his nerdiness, buckteeth, and Chinese accent, and had a media blitz lasting a few years playing “himself” in this stereotypical Asian role in films and television shows. Both Cheung and Hung gained short-lived notoriety and public attention as the legible and laughable other, or as the native Asian woman and native Asian boy respectively in the United Kingdom and the United States, and were “adored” for their aberrations. But they are hardly exceptional, since representations of Asians as unassimilable aliens or celestial beings have a long visual and narrative logic in the Western media. This marketable logic with the dyad as its silent imprint continues to regulate portrayals of Asians in the West, though the rise of China as an economic power, and Asia more broadly as a consumer market, appears to be slowly changing the terms of representation.

By dyadic performativity, then, I do not mean to unfix or “correct” these scripted racial identities but to place them within a relational matrix of power that has a colonial history. Hence, while the colonial hand wavers between a strong arm and a tender touch, the nativized occupies a range of positions and affects that are sometimes docile and sometimes resistant. But rather than once again putting the boy to the use of the colonial, one might examine the complex senses of magic, affection, and fascination, bewilderment and disgust, as differentially shared by both parties rather than simply as the experience of one over the other. This “two-way street,” as it were, necessitates a discussion that includes but also exceeds clear indictments of colonial hegemony and native complicity. I have in mind questions of pleasure, prohibition, and romance mixed in with exigencies of queer survival (on both sides) that are sometimes expressed through self-preserving and exploitative acts, and sometimes through self-reflexive and ironic play. (This exceeds questions of authorial intentions where biography or cultural background is often used to account for doing certain acts.) The alternating critical foci between the two positions in the dyad allow for a level of flexibility in addressing a spectrum of queer issues wherever
and whenever the two meet under the thrall of an Asian encounter or Asian performance. Importantly, these alternating foci afford a space for considering the Asian boy explicitly as a queer episteme and dilemma of theater and performance studies in a transnational frame.

Native Boys in Context

While each native boy has a unique story with different connections to colonialism and performance, his story is often wrapped up in joyless questions of agency and volition as if these were the only ways to understand his predicament. The mutually constitutive queerness of the white male desiring gaze and the nativized innocent nubile boy is also lost in the alluring logics by which each becomes recognizable in broader contexts, from the technics of ethnic self-display in the West, the programming of the mass media, and the curatorial dictates of mainstream theater circuits to the masculinist ethos of postcolonial nationalism. In chapters 2 and 3, I will address the recoverability of the dyad's presence primarily through the visibility or invisibility of the native boy as the Asian boy, and propose to read these performative iterations as “glocalqueer” in Singapore or New Asia, and as “G.A.P. (Gay Asian Princess) drama” in Asian/America.

These formulations assume the permeability and porosity of Asian encounters across time and space, and are an analytic for understanding tropic spells. In “The Global Asian Queer Boys of Singapore,” I explore the state’s tendentious investment in pink-dollar capitalism and the blind spots of global queering as a discourse for the country’s recent, English-language gay theater. My major case study is the theatrical trilogy Asian Boys, Vols. 1, 2, and 3, by the Malay playwright Alfian Sa’at, whose work alongside that of other local artists raises important questions about the boy’s autoexotic display and gay agency in the region. I suggest that the theatricality of the Asian boys has to be read as a glocalqueer production that serves a number of critical functions, including the way it can undo the binaries (West/East, First World/Third World, legitimate/fake, advanced/backward) often internalized in studies about queer and postcolonial productions.

The dyad’s postcolonial transformations enact a crucial spatio-epistemic shift from the interpretive paradigm of global queering, which
has focused narrowly on how so-called local queer subjects are adopting Western-style gay, lesbian, and transgender identity for their own agencies. The coordinates of such a global/local, West/East binary tend to reinscribe a problematic ontological premise for international queer subjects by making the assumption that a queer, sexual Being exists on stable, identitarian grounds across time and space cohesively structured. The stability of this identitarian base is consolidated by the prominence and permeability of Western queer culture and identity. This means that the politics of queer representation and encounter in trans/national contexts often uncritically privilege the prominence of Western modalities and mobilities of queerness. Consequently, queer cross-cultural exchanges are invariably reduced to a quandary around ahistorical identity claims, and focused on the iconicity of the white gay male. There is thus a sense of epistemic narcissism in which global queering is all about or only happening in relation to Anglo-American men or the Western gay male gaze. For instance, classic liberal questions using this approach include “how gay identities will change as ‘Asians’ recuperate Western images and bend them to their own purposes”;44 and the perennial curiosity—“Are Chinese, Indian and Malay gay men (closeted) like American gay men?” This internal logic undergirds the problematic bifurcation between Western or Euro-American LGBT and the ethnic/world gay, without seeing how shows like Asian Boys paradoxically constitute and confound tradition, queerness, and the diaspora in the Asias.

The transmogrification of native boys as “Asian boys” bears some elaboration in the context of Singapore. Asian boys represent one of several types of “queer boys” circulating in the global gay market, and is itself a contested term. In the Western context, the white, urban, gay male youth is a generic icon of queer boys, while Asian boy is a subcultural category referencing the racialized fetishes of an older white male for the diminutive and effeminized Asian male. The emergence of Asian boys in Singapore and their theatricalization in local plays like Asian Boys both reiterate and transform the Asian houseboy trope. For instance, the play’s critique points to the Singapore state as a substitute for the white male in the classic colonial/nativized boy coupling: Are global Asian queer boys the state’s unspeakable fetish as it turns to queer capital to sex up its insipid image as a draconian father-state? One
might note that the Asian boy is already imbricated in the state's use of Asia as cultural capital for touristic, economic, and political ends. The Singapore Tourism Board has been quick to exploit such an imaginary in its autoexoticizing construction of this multicultural “Lion City” as “New Asia.” In an interesting turn, the queer dimensions of this imaginary are brought out by critics who argue that the imaginary of “New Asia” has also been constructed in part by the idea of a “queer Asia.”

Based on a queer and exotic interculturalism, Singapore’s claim as the nexus of New Asia—the “heart of Asia” fusing “Occidental and Oriental influences”—is inscribed on the bodies of its transcultural Asian boys. Importantly, however, the focus on global Asian queer boys does not mean in any way that queerness in Singapore, inflected by differentials in class, race, and gender, is reducible to this trope or intelligible only through the performativity of the white daddy/Asian boy binary.

The prominence of Chinese males as Asian boys, for instance, is tied to the rise of East Asian economies. Having frenetically advanced to First World status within three decades of independence, Singapore’s rapid economic development is a singular achievement in the relatively impoverished ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of which it is a member. The combined nominal GDP per capita of ASEAN was US$1,154 in 2001, which was less than 6 percent of Singapore’s national GDP per capita of US$20,659, a figure that rose to US$59,900 in 2011. Hence, Singapore is often imagined outside this geopolitical grouping of Southeast Asia as an “Asian tiger” with South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Singapore’s imagined transportability across Asia feeds into the racialized construction of “Asian boys” in the tourist porno-tropics. The boys, in other words, help to configure the island nation within the miracle spell of an East Asian economic imaginary waiting to be consumed. According to the “brand development” manager of the Singapore Tourism Board,

“New Asia—Singapore” is the tourism brand that Singapore Tourism Board launched in 1996. It aims at positioning Singapore as a unique city-state at the heart of Asia, by expounding on the curious blend of Occidental and Oriental influences, of things old and new that have
made Singapore unlike any other in the world. It also spoke of Singapore as being a vibrant, dynamic Asian country celebrating the best of her diverse cultures and traditions, and preserving and nurturing her Asian heritage, even as the country embraced the economic marvels of high technology.\footnote{47}

In this touristic master narrative, Singapore’s cultural identity as an Asian state takes on a continental proportion as “New Asia” while amalgamating the wonders of an intercultural space fusing “Occidental and Oriental influences” in the “heart of Asia.”\footnote{48} It is an Asia waiting to be “discovered.” The didactic memo, reminiscent of colonial makeover projects in the Asia Pacific, is the postcolony’s reverse exotic narrative sanctioned by its own Asian patriarch.

Singapore’s global Asian queer boys are figures caught on the cusp of epistemic, ontological, and political im/possibilities in the face of this postcolonial daddy. Are they a resistant figure or do they merely laminate the “liberative” possibilities of a queer globalism over racialized sexual tropes like the Balinese brown boys? Is the colonized native boy reprised in Singapore, where the male citizen who does not participate in the country’s heteronormative national production is identified or prefigured as no more than a “boy” with dreamy escapades? These questions point to the complications and multiple meanings generated and forestalled by glocal queer Asian boys who stand in for contemporary embodiments of the native boy.

Enabling and yet complicit in neoliberal and nationalist agendas, Singapore’s global Asian queer boys and their troubled visibility foreground the difficulties in understanding the contingencies of, or what counts as politically efficacious, queer representation in a multicultural, multiracial metropolis. They are a crucial case study that demands close readings of native boys in context: Where do local gay male bodies fit within the state’s nationalistic mantra, “One People, One Nation, One Singapore,” in the geopolitical imaginary of New Asia, and in other such official cultural blueprints as “Renaissance City” and “Global City for the Arts”? How are such representations, voices, and performances of the native boy to be read and understood in a glocal queer world?
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Transcolonial Traditions

It bears note that the queer politics of Asian performance traditions tend to be contentious when a “tradition” is tied to one ethnic heritage, often with a vested interest in preserving its native “authenticity” as a matter of national pride. This directed investment in authenticity or in one pristine tradition is often under the influence of a colonial spell with heteronormative assumptions. The Asian boy hovers over such a traditionalist turn as the tropic influence that dare not speak its name. Tellingly, the “community’s” unspoken fear of the boy’s deracinated masculinity is expressed obliquely through postures of ethnic muscle, such as the early cultural nationalism of Asian America. Traditionalism is often couched as a heteronormative and patriarchal institution, whether it is espoused by the postcolonial father-state such as Singapore’s “Asian values” campaign from 1976 to the early 1990s or by the Big Asian American “Aiieeeeee,” led by the authors Frank Chin, Paul Chan, and others in the early 1970s. Both projects are in search of or in sync with an Asian paternal figure on top, and are keen to obliterate the native boy’s innocence or infantilization. As is well known, Singapore’s deployment of Asian values is a cultural nationalist campaign against the hegemony of Western liberal democracy based on a regional solidarity model (with Malaysia, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar) that is self-legitimating. Instead of internalizing Western exceptionalism, it willfully depicts the West as morally decadent, inept, and arrogant. The move is not, however, only a rhetorical posture or a cultural war about clashing civilizations. Rather, it is used, as some have argued, to consolidate the postcolonial state’s authoritarianism under the cover of “Asian democracy” and “Asian capitalism.”

The substitution of the Asian communitarian father for the colonial white daddy sets the path for the heteronormative Singaporean to come out as a good Asian who sees, if paradoxically, the value of privatization over welfarism, consensus over conflict, collective over self, and national interest over individualism. This is a postcolonial rebuke of the bad Western. The crude and hyperbolic bifurcations are a play on and reversal of the dyad’s power relations based on ludicrous orientalist tropes (colonial daddy/Asian son) in the first place. Their successful reiterations, however, are contingent on a careful staging
and valorization of particular cultural assumptions that are often also bureaucratic inventions. The Asianizing of the Singaporean citizen, for instance, involved a massive Confucian ethics education at schools, designed by eight foreign Confucian scholars. Apparently, no one in Singapore was familiar with the field even as it was purportedly part of the country’s cultural constitution. Notwithstanding its Sinic cultural heritage, Confucianism was deemed “universalistic” and “humanistic” as an Asian cultural form in multiracial (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Caucasian) Singapore. As a Confucianist ethos was literally imported to authenticate Singapore’s Asian identity, its founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, was consecrated “a modern Confucius.” This performative consecration marked the rise of the Asian father vis-à-vis Western demagoguery. Lee’s old sage act as Confucius is also a theatrical counterpoint to Singapore’s nebulous identity as the region’s youngest and most Westernized country, or a native boy gone rogue, quickly wise, and more Asian than Asians. As Slavoj Žižek sees it, this inventive Asian encounter is between (Chinese) Singaporean capitalism with Asian values and Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism. To put it differently, it is a battle between the efficiencies of two closely related regimes, one authoritarian and one neoliberal, that also marks the end of the marriage between capitalism and democracy.

In Asian America, Frank Chin and his compadres sought to disrupt the logic of racial domination and emasculating stereotypes produced in part by the historic 1882 exclusion laws (and their subsequent restrictions) against primarily Chinese and later all East Asian immigrants. This discursive pushback was chiefly concentrated against the racist debasement of Asian men relegated to doing soft or “feminized” labor, such as laundry, cooking, and grocery shopping service on the one hand, and being no more than asexual sociopaths and moral degenerates like Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan on the other hand. The devi-

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identity using Chinese and Japanese American testosterone, male muscle, and male worldviews as a corrective.\(^\text{54}\)

In Chin’s 1972 play *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam Lum, one of the central Chinese American characters, remembers his boyhood hero, the Lone Ranger, as a Chinese male in disguise about to bring “Chinaman vengeance on the West.” The hyperbole of racial substitution in this white man/Asian boy encounter appears to be a casual reference to a childhood memory for Lum, but it also underpins what Chin calls the “embodiment of Asian-American manhood.”\(^\text{55}\) In other words, the man/boy dyad is formative of Asian American cultural nationalism, and an alternative manhood can be generated only by substituting cross-racial identifications and solidarities between black, Japanese, and Chinese American adult males for the Lone Ranger. But this manly call against institutionalized racism and white dominance is seemingly unaware of its sexism or Eurocentric gender ideology. Lisa Lowe, among other critics in the field, points out that their insistence on a fixed masculinist identity “can be itself a colonial figure used to displace the challenges of heterogeneity, or subalternity, by casting them as assimilationist or anti-ethnic.”\(^\text{56}\)

Crucially, such a colonial figure is also a queer problematic since it invokes the historical exclusion of the Asian male from “normative” masculinity. The Asian boy haunts this discourse of gendered exclusion in the United States, and his exclusion is obtained wherever and whenever the universalizing subjectivity of whiteness is assumed as the given standard or pivotal point. This racialized predicament is necessarily queer (or has to be queered) insofar as it aligns “manly” identifications with whiteness and heteronormative legitimacies. As is clear, the reality of a white man having gravitas or the Asian male being a native boy is a myth of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism. As a theatrical conceit, the purchase of such tropes and its continuing reiterations in the signifying economy are obtained by what one is not, or whom one is defined against. Hence, one’s a man and the other’s a boy, one is American whereas the other’s forever foreigner. Where these are or thought to be conditions of his survival, they also produce a nativized body with symptoms of racial grief, rage, and hysteria. In this regard, the native boy is a paradox incarnate: he carries the residue of colonial or imperial history, and is ineluctably (for he cannot but be) a player in
scenarios of fantasy and conquest; yet he is also a theatrical iteration who plays out the fantasy and conquest as incoherent, and even ruined. Between scenarios of colonial interpellation and queer intervention, he is caught in a range of charged debates about agency, exoticism, exploitation, and eroticized subjecthood.

The comparative, transcolonial context I outlined above between Singapore and Asian America lends itself to a number of queer scenarios that can potentially relieve the critical impasse of representation around the Asian boy using ethnic camp. In chapter 3, “G.A.P. Drama, or The Gay Asian Princess Goes to the United States,” the scenario of conquest is parodied through the figure of the rice queen who is desperately in love with the diasporic gay Asian male in the United States standing in for the native boy. I examine this scenario as a dramatic predicament by revisiting David H. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* using the native boy as a central figure, and subsequently with a queer solo performance by Justin Chin based on an adaptation of the novel and film *The World of Suzie Wong*. The unlivable scenario under the regime of the rice queen is a mock protest performance in ethnic camp, a queer commentary on the racialized conditions targeted by Frank Chin and his compadres with their war cry against a racist Euro-America. But G.A.P. is also queering, or at least endeavoring to queer, the lives of all nativized Asians in the world! The native-ethnic transmogrification here is at once real and parodic, and points to the racial legacies of the queer dyad in the post-colonial and diasporic borderzones of Singapore, China, Thailand, and Asian America. Such a campy reading opens up a new set of questions about the bewitching politics of transcultural magic, and the mutually constitutive spells that the dyad casts in the production of art in the Asias.

In the final chapter of the book, which serves as a conclusion, “Toward a Minor-Native Epistemology in Transcolonial Borderzones,” I expand on the native-ethnic intersection by formulating a reading practice that brings together Native American studies with performance in the Asias. It imagines a different return to the conventional hetero-orientalist scenario where the brown woman is the scopic center by considering the productive outcomes of the boy “rubbing up” against this scenario. The queer f(r)ictons of this simple “rub” wrest the brown woman out of the seemingly entrenched hetero-orientalist setting and into an-Other
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comparative framework with Native America. Using Chin Woon Ping’s Details Cannot Body Wants, a Peranakan (Straits Chinese) Asian/Ameri-
can solo woman show, as an exemplary case of transcolonial perfor-
manence, I set the brown woman next to other minor scenarios in native
and ethnic studies, and postcolonial and queer studies. This is suggestive
of future critical directions in which studies about the native (woman) is
informed by dyadic queerness or comparative racialization in the Asias
rather than the standard orientalist configurations in the West. In other
words, a transcolonial paradigm of tradition can potentially bring out an
alternative set of analytics for the Asian boy and Asian woman. Between
Asian/America, Native America, and Southeast Asia, their “jumps” in
the Asias can potentially exceed even the dyads examined in this study
by triangulating them in nondiscrete geographies.

Performance in the Asias

Facing the vast reconfigurative scope of these inquiries, one might ask,
why even assume that the Asian boys’ spellbinding allure continues in
the transnational Asias, from the Anglophone postcolony to the Asian
diaspora in the West? How is performance in the Asias situated vis-à-
vis Asian theater? Where is Asia in all this? In using “the Asias,” I mean
to invoke the contesting imaginaries, aesthetics, and interregional and
diasporic formations that make up Asia, itself a term of no easy defi-
nition. Yet Asia is generally settled (in official parlance and some aca-
demic fields) as a stable geographic referent, or the originator of vari-
ous, apparently self-evident ethnicities. The historian and literary critic
Naoki Sakai postulates that Asia is neither a “cartographic index” nor
a sensible identificatory label. Rather, it emerged in the late nineteenth
century as a heteronomous term when “a few intellectuals began to
advocate the plausibility of constituting the transnational and regional
subjectivity of Asia.”57 If “the word Asia originated outside of Asia,” for-
mulated ostensibly by “Europeans to distinguish Europe from its east-
ern others,” its genealogical gridlock with the West would also produce
a conceptual dyad whose legibilities are contingent upon that history:

Only through the acknowledgment of its lost autonomy, of its depen-
dence to the West, or only in the mirror of the West, so to say, could Asia
reflectively acquire its civilizational, cultural, ethnic, or national consciousness. The defeat is registered in the genealogy of the name itself.\textsuperscript{58} Asia can therefore be spoken of only as the “negative of the West,” and to “talk about Asia is invariably to talk about the West.”\textsuperscript{59} This history, refracted through the institutionalization of Cold War–era area studies programs, has a number of implications for Asian theater studies as a nationalist and culturalist formation. Significantly, the notion of an Asian theater from a “distinct” geographic area with a knowable history coincides with the rise of the United States (following Europe) as an imperialist power with military bases in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. As the historian Vicente L. Rafael notes, the “systematic instrumentalization of foreign languages to serve nationalist ends runs far and deep in American thinking,” most evident in the production of “area studies experts whose knowledge of other cultures would help shore up ‘our way of life.’”\textsuperscript{60} Translation is in this sense a national security issue that “protect[s] ourselves from them and . . . ensure[s] that they remain safely within our reach whether inside or outside our borders.”\textsuperscript{61} The geographically deterministic study of theater traditions in Asia follows the logics of this organization. Asian theater is thus either presented as the (radical) other of Western forms or nativized as local traditions with ancient, timeless aesthetics. Imperialism is not relevant in such studies, just as there is little interest in transcolonial approaches focusing on shared orientalized histories or regional performance vocabularies facilitated by trade routes, religion, or migration. Rather, the West is the point of departure and return.

The role that “Asian theater” plays in recent world theater textbooks may be helpful in illuminating this point. I am referring to the newer textbooks that aim to globalize theater studies, and are generally speaking a welcome departure from their Eurocentric predecessors. In the \textit{Longman Anthology of Drama and Theatre: A Global Perspective}, for example, the editors condensed the myriad theater traditions of India, China, and Japan into one chapter that stood out for its geographic demarcation rather than the rich periodization reserved for Europe.\textsuperscript{62} The Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for instance, continue to be the exclusive temporal domains of Europe. Making space rather than time for this excursion
to the non-Western world, the move indicates the timeliness of Asian traditions for a global perspective that is nonetheless predicated on their timelessness. The editors claim nine generalizable characteristics that are common to Asian theater, a designation for over twenty-five thousand theater troupes covering over two billion people. In predictable fashion, the pointers include Asian theater's spiritual or mystical origins, lack of realism, and the use of dance, mime, masks, painted faces, and gesture as its main theatrical language. Their schematic fabulation bifurcating “Balinese (Asian) Theater” from “Western Theater” is offered this way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BALINESE (ASIAN) THEATER</th>
<th>WESTERN THEATER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mystical</td>
<td>Realistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture and Signs</td>
<td>Dialogue and Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual and Transcendence</td>
<td>Ethics and Morality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphysical State</td>
<td>“The Here and Now”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does Not Rely on Rational Continuity</td>
<td>Causality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcends Reality on Stage</td>
<td>Creates Reality on Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandons Illusion</td>
<td>Creates Realistic Illusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Platforms and Spaces</td>
<td>Uses Scenery and Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds and Rhythms</td>
<td>Speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is clear, this chart by the editors neatly summarizes the main characteristics already offered, but this time by way of its otherness to Western theater. Hence, while Balinese (Asian) theater is “mystical” and “does not rely on rational continuity,” Western theater (which one?) is realistic, logocentric, and driven by “causality” and “ethics and morality.” The editors claim Antonin Artaud’s manifesto *The Theatre and Its Double* as their inspiration. For Artaud, however, the performative setup of otherness or otherworldliness renders a portal to transcend the “mausoleum of the (Western) mind” with “the alchemical theater” that seizes upon “what is communicative and magnetic in the principles of all the arts,” and thereby combine the two. Such a visionary alchemy is partly conjured by the “theatrical operation of making gold” from nothing, alluding to the centrality of performance as both a method and
metaphor of integration and disintegration—the stuff of magic. While Artaud’s thought experiment is more cosmological than geographic, spectral rather than monolithic, the editors’ approach is precisely the reverse in their singular and geographically determined study of theater in China, Japan, and India. Their irreconcilable binary polarizes Bali and the West, and fixates on an alterity that is binding rather than doubling. Their reductionism distills Artaud’s “magic,” an oft-cited charge of his orientalism, with their own spell of difference about the Asian exotic.

Yet this is evidently not a spell that the editors are aware of in their sensible illumination and standardized pedagogy about Asian theater. Instead, they make a veiled charge of orientalist visuality against a dead white man less known for his rationality: “Artaud compares the theaters of the West and of the East, though his comments reflect a Western bias.” An insouciant declaration validates their version of theatrical inquiry on Asia using facts, an enlightened optic, and an inclusive global curriculum. This cover updates the salvational ethos by orientalists without whose knowledge and dissemination the theatrical traditions of Asia would perish. Rey Chow posits this kind of work by specialists in a cognate field, East Asian studies, as sharing an episteme with primatology, calling out the “self-interestedness” of those who refuse to engage the colonial-orientalist nexus of Asian cultural formations.

What I have been intimating is that in each of these encounters—Asia and the West, U.S. area studies, and Asian theater within a global perspective—various spells of difference organize an entrenched position, a nationalist epistemology, and a culturalist pedagogy. Artaud’s magical ruminations about Balinese performance are therefore not exclusive or an eccentric exception but a different manifestation of the same logics. On the question of magic in colonial encounters, the anthropologist Michael Taussig posits that mutually constitutive spells are cast between the colonizer and colonized in an “epistemic murk,” where figurations of the “Wild Man” engender all kinds of imaginary infections, nativized nightmares, and erratic terrors on the one hand, and healing properties on the other hand. His specific case study involves a regime of terror and genocide in the Putumayo River area of Colombia in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where a cabal of British rubber barons sought to impose a capitalist mode of production by eliminating any
indigenous resistance to its agenda. Their demented obsessions about the native male are symptoms of among other things *mal aire*, which means “evil wind,” a complicated, polysemic index of *infideles* (pagans, heathens, infidels) from the preconquest era capable of causing illness or even death. Yet this may also be a manifestation of Indians killed in the colonial conquest returning to haunt the colonizers.

Such an affective complex forms an “implicit social knowledge,” which some have characterized as a brew of “rotting, sickening mess” where the “stinking by-products” of official history—“the senselessness and amorality, the cruelty, the maddening fear, the losses, the tragedies, the suffering, the misery”—are amassed and forgotten.70 This is a “non-discursive knowing of social relationality and history,” different from conscious ideology and empirical fact-finding missions in its “inarticulable and imageric” constitution.71 Rather, it “moves people without their knowing quite why and how, with what makes the real real and the normal normal, and above all with what makes ethical distinctions politically powerful.”72 Since man is never cruel without impunity, the colonizer’s violence of subjugation has also produced a spell of perception from the winds of pulverized corpses in his interaction with the living native as the slave/shaman: “The master maltreated his slave, but feared his hatred. He treated him like a beast of burden but dreaded the magical powers imputed to him.”73 In other words, fear has also produced an (over)investment in the terrific magical powers of the shamans. And such a scenario is consummately restaged by the natives in an autoexotic display of demonism:

So it has been through the sweep of colonial history where the colonizers provided the colonized with the left-handed gift of the image of the wild man—a gift whose powers the colonizers would be blind to, were it not for the reciprocation of the colonized, bringing together in the dialogical imagination of colonization an image that wrests from civilization its demonic power.74

Notably, the “Wild Man” possession is a consumptive experience involving healing rituals in which the white colonizers partook as an antidote to various sorceries. The colonizers believed that the wilder the Indian, the more powerful his healing power. In Taussig’s ethnographic account
of a séance during which he himself took yagé, a hallucinogenic and purgatory drug, this ossified colonial view of the shaman as the half-devil, half-god wild man gives way to the shaman as “a strategic zone of vacuity, a palette of imageric possibilities.” Importantly, performance organizes this encounter with no truth beneath the surface enacted by actors bearing its requisite spells of wonder.

But where Taussig, Sakai, and Rafael stop in their implicit formulations of a conceptual dyad with a queer sexuality, one must proceed with its queer scenarios in full view. Throughout this introduction, I have argued that historiographic and theatrical (re)enactments help to frame the dyad’s speech acts, desires, and bodies as representations with historical meanings rather than “the way things are.” This staging is important insofar as the colonial extraction of the dyad’s scenarios is sublimated as cultural transactions in fields of study such as Asian American and Asian theater studies. This is in contrast to the recent performance scholarship in the Americas where the politics of such scenarios are more explicitly foregrounded. This has rendered the assumption of Western equanimity, prestige, and patronage as benign or even wondrous. Some of this has to do with the fact that the point of view of the incumbent hegemon, invariably the colonial specialist, or those who are or may be so identified is still dominant. These enduring functions of orientalist hegemony and their queer derivatives have real effects in the reconfiguration of performance practices with both mythic and cultural specificity.

Performance in the Asias, like Asian theater and Asian diasporic performance, is embroiled in overlapping claims of national authenticity, self-identity, and the collective survival of Asian art and artists in its most pragmatic sense. But this struggle is only one part of the story regarding the native boy. Like Taussig’s “Wild Man” or Sakai’s “Asian,” his bodily manifestation is contingent upon a set of performance conditions with identity formations that are potentially deformative rather than fixed, transformable rather than preordained. He is thus a dissipating European invention and a diasporic re-creation, a desperate houseboy and a pink-dollar poster boy, and an Asian nation that is at once economically advanced but also infantilized as a boy with “developmental” issues. The paradox of his queer transmogrifications will always be an orientalist riddle involving the requisite fantasies and fears.
of the West vis-à-vis the Orient and his autoexotic display as a pageant child in need of discipline and adoration. His symptomatic manifestations in the theater, performance, and media have to be examined as a matter of ethnic and cultural critique, and postcolonial and transcolonial study.

Last but not least, the dyad’s queerness saturates the drama and fictions inherent in the myriad scenarios outlined above by introducing native (as well as ethnic and diasporic) camp to colonial performativity. It reiterates with mock austerity a compulsory love for the white man and his institutions amid the native boy’s transmogrifications across time and space. Using this facetious perversion as a basic premise, the book explores performance in the queer Asias as 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. To put it differently, it drags the “originary” colonial scenario, already eminently stageable, to its limits by uncovering its scattered queer histories and corrosive effects across the Asias. This orbit of Asian encounters with different dyadic configurations is a way to consider critical solidarities in transcolonial configurations of the Asias. But more than that, the tropic spell organizing how queer “Asia” is experienced and executed in performance is a necessary analytic for understanding cultural production in today’s and tomorrow’s transnational complex. I hope the set of reading practices proposed here can foreground the magic of tropic spells as a historical trace as well as a function of performance in the queer Asias, and thereby open our eyes to the ways race, sexuality, and empire are embroiled in a set of interconnecting issues on the global stage.