Some years ago in London, a friend I was visiting asked if I wanted to go and see a “transsexual” show. Since I was writing about drag kings at the time and interested in all things involving gender theatricality, I agreed readily to meet her at a theater the next afternoon. I was certainly curious as to what “transsexual show” could possibly have a run in the West End (this was around 2002); and so I came to be in attendance at a “Lady Boys of Bangkok” event. The show was an odd combination of cabaret, show tunes, drag and strip tease and its appeal rested heavily (if not solely) upon the fact that all of the ladies in the show were actually “boys.” There were a few “reveal” moments when one or other Lady Boy would pull off her wig to show that she was really….what? Transsexual? Transgender? A man? A Boy? But the whole event was otherwise a rather ludicrous blend of oriental spectacle and tacky drag. I endured the show, and the audience (mostly women on holiday, with a few gay white men of a certain age thrown in for good measure), and expressed serious doubts about my friend’s definition of “good theater” let alone “transsexual.” I did not think about this show again until I read Eng-Beng Lim’s recent book, Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias, and encountered his complex narrativeabout the odd positioning of Asian masculinity within gay colonial imaginaries and the rendering of that masculinity through the figure of the “boy.” The lady boy and many other “brown boys” make appearances in this book as figures for an extensively homoerotic version of orientalism and as fantasies of erotic and exotic
otherness within the colonial imaginary of the early twentieth century. As the Lady Boys of Bangkok show makes clear, the imaginary is still alive and well and selling tickets in mainstream theater districts around the world.

This study of “Asian performance shaped by the homoerotics of orientalism” also begins with a primal scene of encounter between a western audience and an Asian boy. Eng-Beng Lim attended a staging of A House in Bali in 2010 at BAM and found himself face to face with the subject of his book! A House in Bali, an operatic piece based upon a memoir by Colin McPhee and written by an MIT music professor, features centrally an eight-year old “Balinese dancing boy” who was “the love object of the thirty-one year old Canadian musician Colin McPhee” (2). While A House in Bali is supposed to be a kind of world music extravaganza, Lim’s anecdote at the beginning of his book reveals its entanglement in the long history of nativized spectacle. And while the opera focuses centrally upon the lives of McPhee, Margaret Mead and the German painter Walter Spies as they connect in Bali in early twentieth century, it is the love affair between the adult McPhee and the boy that seems to bind the audience in a rapturous spell. At the performance Lim attends, this enchantment allows the audience to overlook both the homoeroticism and the pedophilia that make up this seductive pairing and it draws the audience into the very magic that was central to orientalist representations of Bali in the first place.

As Lim shows us throughout this engaging book, colonial rapture leaves a complex legacy. While Bali in particular served as an exotic paradise for gay and heterosexual colonizers to indulge their fantasies of beautiful, simplistic natives waiting to be discovered or enlightened or worse, many other Asian sites are magically summoned within colonial and orientalist narratives and many more extend into present day tourist fantasies. Indeed, Asia, Lim shows nimbly, as it is understood from Western perspectives becomes a mix of anthropological encounter, cultural intervention and homo/erotic fantasy. The true and the fantasized become scrambled in such as a way as to make it impossible to disentangle orientalist fantasy from so-called native cultures. Lim’s book draws upon global queer performance cultures, mainstream and alternative, to make sense of this tangle and to separate the spellbinding spectacle from the violent realities it occludes.

More importantly, Lim investigates the role of what he names a primary “colonial dyad,” namely the relationship between the white man and the brown boy, in the co-production of colonial knowledge. While many other scholars have attended to this ubiquitous pairing of white man and brown boy and noted its centrality to colonial modernity, most of these scholars, such as Joseph Boone for example, as Lim notes, remain exclusively focused upon the subjectivity, the experiences and the discourse of the white man (although it would be interesting to see if this remains true in his new book The Homoerotics of Orientalism). Few works, if any, focus upon the boy, casting him instead as superfluous or unreadable in his desires. For Lim the boy is central, not as someone to be rescued or restored to discourse but 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” (9).

In a tour de force chapter on “A Colonial Dyad in Balinese Performance” that makes up the core of this book, Lim turns to a form of dance, kecak, which has been cast as an iconic form of Bali’s cultural heritage. This “monkey dance” features a male chorus that performs a ritual dance within which they are magically transformed from men into monkeys from the Ramayana epic. Lim seeks to read the meaning and the development of this dance back through the series of colonial encounters that led to its production within an ever-widening set of performance practices in the Asias.

Lim points usefully to the ways in which other writers like Mike Taussig and Naoki Sakai have tracked the overlapping logics of magic and mayhem in the colonial encounter, but he also notes how reluctant most critics are to name the homoeroticism that extends throughout such encounters. And so, in the chapter on Bali, Lim introduces us to the German gay impresario, adventurer, and artist, Walter Spies, who became central to the production of Bali as a paradise, as a land that modernity forgot, and as a place of mysterious rituals and trance-like dances. Using archival research and a cache of photographs that he found in in the Leiden University library, Lim shows how Spies framed encounters between luminaries like Margaret Mead, Noel Coward and Charlie Chaplin and the culture of Bali. He staged and choreographed dances that were then consumed as authentic; he posed Balinese men and boys for photographs that were then seen as naturalistic; he infused “traditional” dances with homoerotic scripts. Lim reads Spies’ hidden hand back into the narrative of Bali as it appears in film, in ethnographic texts and in tourist books and he digs deep into an archive that, as he puts it, lies beyond the reach of conventional research. Lim writes: “Put simply, there is no conventional method for documenting queer erotics, particularly in the colonial context of prohibition, and there is certainly no dedicated archive for the dyad’s myriad encounters” (51).

What follows then is a fascinating attempt to over read the archive to draw its queer histories out into the open and to find queer inscriptions in the history of a dance that comes to stand in for authentic Bali culture. He glances at criminal records of Spies’ arrests for sex with minors but refuses to make his account into a moralistic condemnation of Spies for his sexual escapades. Instead, he draws our attention to gestures, poses and glances caught on film and in photographic records and argues that Spies represents a homoerotic investment in the sexual freedom that the “Orient” represented to wealthy gay men at this time. Lim sums up: “Spies’s quest for a lateral equivalence between his Balinese same-sex encounters and escape from Western sexual oppression found expression in the fetishization of native boys and the production of a new ritual form tied to orientalist art” (65).

As one might imagine, Lim’s attention to the homoerotic dynamics animating western incursions into Bali draws outraged responses from other scholars working in the area. The
section of this chapter where Lim details and responds to these scholars is humorous and fascinating as we witness the ways in which scholarship itself extends and cements the “truth” of the colonial archive even as it dismisses and refutes the relevance of homoerotic material, sex crimes, sexual tourism and the details of seemingly ubiquitous encounters between white colonialists and brown boys. Ranging from disgust to dismissal, historians and dance scholars have stepped in to protect the archive from such imputations, fearing, I suppose, that if this history is besmirched by homoerotic relations then no colonial archive will be clean again.

The other chapters in *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, predictably perhaps, do not quite live up to the promise of this early chapter on Bali. The archival material and Lim’s deft readings of it give this chapter heft and speaks to the originality of his research. It also showcases the skill he deploys to find a way through and around the conceptual road blocks that the hegemonic guardians of the field throw in his way in an attempt to safeguard colonial legacies. The chapters on Singapore and gay Asian performance in the US are interesting for their contributions to, as he puts it, “queer reading practices of performance in the Asias” and for the very specific claims Lim wants to make about the cultural work of performance in cross-cultural matrices of influence, capital and exchange. All in all, this book manages to cast its own spells and seductions and in its rendering of the centrality of the erotic dyad of the white man/brown boy to colonial knowledge production, Lim makes significant and indelible contributions to the histories of global performance, the Asias, queer theory and cultural colonialism.

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