

But what *can* ever happen to Queer Theory?: An Introduction to 'Queer Theory and Visual Cultures in Southeast Asia'

[Brian Curtin](#)

Queerness [is] about history. Moreover, the fall of the historically queer into the identificatory logic of self-representation marks the end of queerness per se.

- Graham L. Hammill^[1]

The question of agency and activism remains at the core of critical thinking in queer theory.

- Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian and Beatrice Michaelis^[2]

1. The title of this special edition of *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* is deceptively succinct. 'Queer Theory and Visual Cultures in Southeast Asia' immediately suggests the filtering of 'regional' or 'local' imagery through whatever can be assumed of Queer Theory as a definable academic enterprise. But queer theory and Southeast Asia semantically share, as discursive constructs would, a lack of consensus over meaning and can beget volatile political urgencies over the shapes they have, can and could take. Or, simply, there are reasons to centrally question the efficacy of these mantles (and therefore will their retirement) and reasons to keep them in view. Some reasons are sketched below as an introduction to this special edition which acknowledges tensions and clashes between while retaining a commitment to the very idea of Queer *Theor[ies]*. 'Queer Theory' and 'Southeast Asia' could function as theoretically reductive markers but also, as these essays so provocatively point to, ideas, practices and ambitions that have already been written under their names may be explored, extended and re-written or productively engaged or ignored in order to take account of and further the critical vitality of the general interests of these 'areas.' In extreme shorthand, critical considerations of identity; and the region's relationship to ideas of Asia and western-centric worldviews. In this respect the essays here range from the indictment of a transgender stereotype produced in relation to the class privileges of 'gay globality' in [Mikee N. Inton's](#) account of the filmic representation of the Philippine *bakla* to [Alicia Izharuddin's](#) examination of relationships between feminism and Queer Theory in order to articulate the meanings of decolonial aesthetics for the constraints that can shape gender, sexuality and ethnicity in Malaysia; to [lola Lenzi's](#) speculations on human rights and civil society for framing queer expression in contemporary art from the region. Many of the key concerns that continue to inform queer theories—agency, essentialism, representation and the conditions of the sayable—are here vitalised in ways that should not be considered of exclusive 'local' interest but rather expanded as newer relationships and understandings are figured.
2. Region and/or territoriality have been treated benignly or critically depending on the object of study. Visual cultures allow us an immediate means of reflecting anthropologist Michael G. Peletz's summary description of the conceptual challenge of Southeast Asia with the acknowledgment, 'There is little disagreement that movement, hybridity, porousness, and pluralism have long been prominent features of the region, however broadly or narrowly defined.'^[3] Whether approached in traditional, modern or contemporary terms, Southeast Asia is perpetually networked beyond, and in spite of, actual geographical boundaries. This claim has the important impact of displacing national[ist] and 'local' frameworks for analysis which, as Ara Wilson highlights in her essay 'Queering Asia,'^[4] carry the problems of recuperating or mediating indigenous traditions to romantic-nativist interest and, furthermore, an inability to, as Wilson paraphrases Dipesh Chakrabarty, provincialise the West in order to challenge the problems

of its hegemony.^[5] (And, I would add, skirts the risk of a potential capitulation to elite ideologies concerning country and nation). Wilson proposes an account of critical regionalism as a means of examining the specificities of Asian histories, the dynamics of pan-Asian development and cultural formations without reductive evocations of geography.^[6] John Wei's essay here builds on Wilson by complicating further questions of geo-positions and geo-proximities. Contributing to the critical evolution of the area of Sinophone Studies—that is, the study of Sinitic cultures outside diasporic relationships to mainland China—Wei debates the significance of intra-cultural queer relationships for the refiguring of notions of national and ethnic belonging and affiliation. Through the short works of the Malaysian filmmaker Desmond Bing-Yen Ti he highlights the practical and theoretical problems of thinking in terms of borders or boundaries as Ti's films, which play with the fragility of categories of sexual identity, cross cultural-linguistic and social-censorious contexts to reflect diversity and radical exchange.

3. Wei's essay holds an understanding that queer, in all its permutations, and Queer Theory can be mutually reinforcing and available to transformation. This point is, of course, somewhat moot once we follow through the commentaries of major writers on queer-ness, where ambiguities and a critical reflexivity are always and already woven through: from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's widely-cited claim, in 1990, that queer is 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically';^[7] through Catherine Lord's and Richard Meyer's observation that "'Queer' offers more generous rewards than any simple inventory of sexual practices or erotic object choices";^[8] to Lauren Berlant's and Michael Warner's argument that 'Queer commentary takes on varied shapes, risks, ambitions, and ambivalences in various contexts,' cautioning 'it is not useful to consider queer theory a thing, especially one dignified by capital letters. We wonder whether queer commentary might not more accurately describe the things linked by the rubric, most of which are not theory';^[9] and author and academic Jonathan Kemp summarily wrote, 'As such, queer is a practice or process of critique, an ongoing challenge to whatever stands as the norm. And over the seventeen years since it emerged as a critical term it has come to stand for different things and be used to critique different aspects of contemporary life.'^[10]
4. However, the singularity of the term 'theory' and the dominance of North American writers can engender critical concerns, as suggested by this selection of quotes. Peter A. Jackson has pointed out that practices of queer-ing rather than the details of Queer Theory per se have had a powerful impact in Asia. Examples include the appropriation of the Chinese term *tongzhi* from its traditional meaning of comrade to now gay or lesbian; and also the annual Pink Dot event in Singapore which plays with the significance of the colour in terms of its use for national identity cards as well as from gay history. Jackson described queer as 'a convenient way to talk about people of diverse genders and sexualities when they come together to resist anti-gay, anti-lesbian and anti-transgender laws, policies and attitudes.'^[11] This reflects the commonly cited reference to non-normative sexualities connected with a range of desires, relationships, identities and politics. Here the broad or umbrella qualities of these descriptions should pose no challenge to thinking through any variety of different contexts; and, as Michael O'Rourke traced for his preface to *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism and the Political*, the scattered interest of queer studies internationally can be embraced for a diversity that is not recuperable to implications of a *discipline* but nevertheless retains a significance in terms of a *self-renewal* of the very term Queer Theory.^[12] O'Rourke cited examples of the global interest of the queer scene in Ireland and the disproportionate relationship between cultural interest and institutionalisation in Germany, stating 'At its very best queer theory has always been *somewhere* else.'^[13]
5. But O'Rourke was responding to what he described as periodic announcements about the 'death' of Queer Theory which, as he expertly traces there and elsewhere, is a notable preoccupation of North American scholars.^[14] Michael Warner's article 'Queer and Then?' in 2012 had provided a recent occasion for hand-wringing over questions of Queer Theory's continuing vitality from its heady earlier years.^[15] O'Rourke rightly asks how the shape of the field might be assessed if the US was not the

starting point. 'Queer Theory and Visual Cultures in Southeast' aims to ask the same with a commitment to theory/theorisation that can continue to vitalise some of key ideas and terms that have emerged under the mantle of Queer Theory and where, again, geo-positions and geo-proximities may prove important or may be necessarily transcended as we continue to re-think relationships. [Oliver Ross's](#) essay provides a nuanced engagement with constraints on ideas of subversion, extending the queer interest of subversion through a juxtaposition with what opposition can mean; and moves outwards from the Singaporean national-legal contexts of Loo Zihan's film *Solos* to a commentary on economics and liberty and the political currency of speech and silence. [Simon Soon](#) explores historical-nationalist encodings of visual and material culture to uncover tradition as a reservoir of identities and bonds that potentially function as fault-lines in official narratives of modernity and nation. And [Jun Zubillaga-Pow](#) offers a sharply critical take on homonationalism while building on theories of performativity and mimicry as a means of defying the reification of the trans- subject who may 'pass' state-proscribed forms of identification.

6. Finally, this edition includes a work of fiction by the artist [Richard Hawkins](#). The narrative is set in a sex-tourist future world called Lotus Island and was inspired by the sight of a blissed-out grin one evening in Bangkok's infamous street of boy bars, Soi Twilight. Hawkins imagines what caused this grin and, in his own words, has employed, 'rhythms, shocks, pulses, ruptures, betrayals and sexual stimulations that, according to the premise of *l'écriture féminine*, might only be found in fictive rather than theoretical voices.'[\[16\]](#) Further to the evocation of Hélène Cixous's formulation, we might imagine a 'return' to the pleasures and pains of the body and how attendant languages and images move through and beyond the boundaries and constructs we grapple with so endlessly.[\[17\]](#)

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Graham L. Hammill, *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe and Bacon*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 69.

[\[2\]](#) Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian and Beatrice Michaelis, 'Introducing queer futures,' in *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism and the Political*, ed. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian and Beatrice Michaelis, Surrey and Vermont: Ashgate, 2013, pp. 1–6, p. 4.

[\[3\]](#) Michael G. Peletz, 'Gender, sexuality, and the state in Southeast Asia,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 71, no. 4 (2012): 895–917, p. 896.

[\[4\]](#) [Ara Wilson](#), 'Queering Asia,' in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, issue 14, 2006, online: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html> (accessed 8 June 2015).

[\[5\]](#) Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000, as used in Wilson, 'Queering Asia,' para 5.

[\[6\]](#) Wilson, 'Queering Asia.'

[\[7\]](#) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 24.

[\[8\]](#) Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, *Art and Queer Culture*, New York and London: Phaidon, 2013, p. 15.

[\[9\]](#) Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'What does Queer Theory teach us about X?,' in *PMLA* vol. 100, no. 2 (1995): 343–49, pp. 343 and 344.

[\[10\]](#) Jonathan Kemp, 'Queer past, Queer present, Queer future,' in *Graduate Journal of Social Science* vol. 6. no. 2 (2009): 3–23, p. 23.

[\[11\]](#) Brian Curtin, 'Queering the pitch, deliberately,' in *Bangkok Post*, 18 October 2012, p. 5.

[\[12\]](#) Michael O'Rourke, 'Series editor's preface: toward a non-queer theory,' in *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism and the Political*, ed. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian and Beatrice Michaelis, Surrey and Vermont: Ashgate, 2013, pp. xiii–xxv.

[13] He was paraphrasing Michael Warner's comment, 'At its best, queer theory has always ... been something else,' O'Rourke, 'Series editor's preface: toward a non-queer theory,' p. xvi.

[14] [Michael O'Rourke](#), 'The afterlives of Queer Theory,' in *Continent*, issue 1.2 (2011), online: <http://continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/32> (accessed 9 April 2015).

[15] [Michael Warner](#), 'Queer and then?,' in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 January 2012, online: <http://chronicle.com/article/QueerThen-/130161/> (accessed 10 June 2015).

[16] In email conversation with Richard Hawkins, 8 February 2014.

[17] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs* vol. 1, no. 4 (1975): 875–93.

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