



Hugo Córdova Quero, Joseph N. Goh and
Michael Sepidoza Campos(eds)

Queering Migrations Towards, From, and Beyond Asia

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reviewed by [Jun Zubillaga-Pow](#)

1. Many regard the twenty-first century as *the* century of migration (p. 1); so claim the co-editors right at the start of *Queering Migrations Towards, From, and Beyond Asia*. Given that we are only merely seventeen years into the century, this statement implies a very bold claim on any rigid correlations between migration and sexual behaviour, contemporary or otherwise. 'That said, social researchers, led separately by Edward Laumann and Brenda Yeoh, have shown that romantic and sexual lifestyles are affected not only by geographical mobility, but also by a range of personal and political factors.[1] From Chicagoan rent boys to Chinese comfort women, human sexuality cannot be considered in isolation from larger social, economic and cultural issues. Exemplified by the groundbreaking work of Nicola Mai's filmic ethnography and Karma Chávez's relational critique, to name but two intellectuals of border rhetoric, queer scholarship has significantly transformed this specific area of socio-cultural research.[2]
2. Historically, and also at the present moment, the act of migrating has always been the life course of the poor and the powerless. Between the intra-regional migration of the Protestant Reformation and the trans-oceanic trafficking of slaves and criminals, those who suffered the fate of being displaced have often been, what society at the time thought of as, the socially and morally deviant. The African and European diaspora in the Americas and Oceania embodies and enacts the historical reminders of this persistent practice of human redistribution. In both settler colonialism and neoliberal globalisation, it is more often than not the singles and lowly-skilled who are most 'movable.' It is precisely because of their inability or refusal to conform or contribute to the developmentalist agenda of production and reproduction that they fall victim to what political scientist, Kelly Greenhill, has called 'weapons of mass migration' between the sending and hosting nations.[3] The construction labourers and domestic workers from South and Southeast Asia represent most succinctly this epistemological divide between those with and without cross-border potentialities.
3. Similarly, the economy of sexual relations is also predicated on what Catherine Hakim calls erotic capital.[4] In this advanced age of technology and terror, sexual poverty or erotic impotence is perceived as a threat to many countries with scarce natural and human resources; Japan being one of these. We learn from Nira Yuval-Davis, amongst others, that the identity and longevity of the nation are closely dependent on the agency of women, while my own essay on the negative dialectics of homonationalism deduces that homosexuality itself is always already anti-national.[5] Taken together, a sexual governance of the state, pragmatic or otherwise, would be to prioritise the

reproductive females and ostracise the gays. The melancholic abjection of this latter group forms the very object of inquiry in *Queering Migrations*. The questions at the heart of this book, which foregrounds the aspirations and affects of gays and trans people of colour, are very much situated in the socio-cultural causes and effects of their physical and psychological displacement.

4. Co-edited by three scholars trained in theology, Hugo Córdova Quero, Joseph N. Goh, and Michael Sepidoza Campos, the nine chapters are organised into three equal parts covering the movement of queers towards, from and beyond Asia. While Asia is an easy catch-all term, more than half of the contents either focus on or relate to Japanese subjects. Except for a roundtable, two of the remaining chapters are (auto)ethnographies dealing with individual Filipinos in the United States, and one on transsexual employees at a drop-in centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. There is a variety of qualitative methods used in this project, including ethnography, media analyses, and multilingual interviews in Brazilian Portuguese, English, Japanese, Malay and Tagalog. The inclusion of transcribed excerpts in the original languages would have been more immediate and helpful especially for students enrolled in Asian Studies programmes. Otherwise, one striking feature is that almost all of the contributors are early career scholars, male writers of colour, and/or themselves first- or second-generation expatriates in Japan or the United States. These demographics by themselves are extremely rare within academic publishing today and the intellectual contents correspondingly reflect the authors' personal interests and shared experiences.
5. What thus stands out markedly in the authors' exposition of trans-Pacific migration is an out-of-place, transcendental discourse that goes beyond the common conception of migration as an embodied experience. Migration for these scholars and their interlocutors can be rendered as emotional, material, physical and spiritual. Take, for instance, the social transformations of the Malaysian *mak nyah* outreach workers as portrayed vividly by Joseph N. Goh. Even though their relocations span a short distance between various rural towns and the urban capital city, they can now feel a sense of acceptance, belonging and purpose. They become more confident of their corporeal compositions as well as their personal relationships with Allah.
6. A similar process of cultural adaptation and theological reconciliation can be discerned in Reverend Jonipher Kwong's recollections of how his extended family resettled from Fujian, China to the Philippines, and then to California and Hawai'i. What binds this essay to Michael Sepidoza Campos's ethnography of healthcare services in a bathhouse is the migration of erotic energy. While Kwong realises the force of what he calls a 'sexy spirit' as a form of communal connection, the visitors to the San Francisco bathhouse transfer their social and superficial prejudices into a supposedly sexual space. What was meant to be a study of 'diasporic *baklâ*' healthcare turned out to be an ethno-sexual critique of six different figures: a Filipino American *baklâ* as protagonist, the author himself as antagonist, two Filipino expatriates and their denial and avowal of being *baklâ*, and the protagonist's two lovers, who hold opposing attitudes towards justice and nationalism. Supplemented with the analyses of poems by fellow Filipino-American health worker, Malaya Arévalo, Campos's 'thick reflection' is in a league of its own. Readers interested in 'insider' research should cross-reference his excellent PhD dissertation as well as more recent work on the phenomena of automobility and return migrations by Bobby Benedicto, Koji Sasaki, and others.[\[6\]](#)
7. The rest of the essays in the book are more or less merographic in their treatment of queer Japanese migrants, expatriates, or descendants, and scholars of Japanese studies will trace a more coherent trajectory by reading them in this suggested order: chapters 5, 4, 1, 9, 2. The two essays by Japanese Kunisuke Hirano (ch. 4) and Canadian Jamie Paquin (ch. 1) form a topical pair, while those by Brazilian Fábio Ricardo Ribeira (ch. 9) and Argentine Hugo Córdova Quero (ch. 2) inform each other. On one hand, their findings of gay men's and straight women's sexual preferences as racist and discriminatory are not unexpected. On the other hand, the maintenance of sexual and

cultural differences in this age of global migration and integration is absolutely bewildering. A minor point of contention is that the writers stop short of giving more information about their own origins and backgrounds. This critical anthropological practice would provide readers a better understanding of their socio-political stances as well as how their respondents react to them.

8. In these essays (as well as the roundtable), there nonetheless remains a docile reliance on theoretical traditions derived from western praxis, such as those by Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. One recommendation would be for the authors to isolate ab-original concepts, such as *gaijin* (p. 56), *hiyâ* (p. 185), *gambare*, or *caçaçao* (p. 202), from the interview material and build a discourse around these epistemological foundations. Alternatively, it would be of interest to posit the Japanese or Brazilian case studies in agonistic dialogue with the contemporary approaches of, say, Lionel Cantú Jr., David Eng, or Eithne Luibhéid, and reconsider mutatis mutandis the exegetic methodologies. For example, Romit Dasgupta's filmic comparisons could venture beyond the heteronormative delineation of queer familial themes of polyamory, reincarnation, and ambivalence, and take on less of an Orientalist or exoticist angle, if he looked at gendered 'sexscapes,' such as the migration of erotic energy between domestic household and construction site in the television mini-series, *Dôsôkai*.
9. Finally, the contents could be more diverse with the inclusion of queer women representatives and coverage of transnational migration within Queer Asia, such as the LGBT tourism industry in Taiwan or Thailand.^[7] All in all, *Queering Migrations* is an ambitious attempt to bring two sub-disciplines into discursive proximity. Notwithstanding its wide-ranging contents, I would recommend this book to undergraduates interested in migration, diaspora, ethnicities, masculinities, sexualities and, most suitably, transnational Japanese studies.

Notes

[1] Edward O. Laumann, Stephen Ellingson, Jenna Mahay, Anthony Paik, and Yoosik Youm (eds), *The Sexual Organization of the City*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004; Melody Lu and Wen-Shan Yang (eds), *Asian Cross-Border Marriage Migration*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010; Heng Leng Chee, Melody C.W. Lu and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, 'Ethnicity, citizenship and reproduction: Taiwanese wives making citizenship claims in Malaysia,' *Citizenship Studies* 18(8) (2014): 823–38.

[2] Nicola Mai, 'Normal: Real stories from the sex industry' (ethnographic documentary), 2012; and Karma Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

[3] Kelly Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion and Foreign Policy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010.

[4] Catherine Hakim, 'Erotic capital,' *European Sociological Review* 26(5) (2010): 499–518.

[5] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage, 1997; Jun Zubillaga-Pow, 'The negative dialectics of homonationalism, or Singapore English newspapers and queer world-making,' in *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Culture*, ed. Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, 149–60.

[6] Michael Sepidoza Campos, *From Bodies Displaced to Self Unfurled: A Queer and Postcolonial Filipino-American Theological Anthropology*, PhD dissertation, Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union, 2011; Bobby Benedicto, *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014; Biao Xiang, Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Mika Toyota (eds), *Return: Nationalising Transnational Mobility in Asia*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

[7] The two female participants of the roundtable, Elizabeth Leung and Lai Shan Yip, were audible on only four pages (pp. 65, 67 and 70–71) of the 242-page book.

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