

**QUEERING THE CULTURE: HOW DOES THE GAY DISCOURSE CHANGE**

**IF WE TAKE CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION SERIOUSLY?**

Body theory has been an area of growth, ambivalence, and politics in the last twenty years, yet the graft with 'Asianness' remains unstable. Beyond generalised tropes of Orientalism, close textual analysis is required to understand the sexualized context of the non-Western gay male body. This essay works through the multiple readings of gay foreign bodies represented within both Thai and Australian popular culture and academic texts. Through relevant textual analysis, an examination into cultural meanings, readership practices, and appropriation by and from Western media culture probes the relationship between images of 'gayness' and Thai 'gay' identity. This essay investigates the semiotic construction of 'gay' discourses in both Thai and Western popular images for both the Thai and Western reader. A critique of how 'gay' is translated, embodied, and defined within representations and images in Thai popular culture demonstrates that Thai 'queer' communities resist neo-colonialist discourses by selectively appropriating particular Western gay terminology and identities in order to create distinctly Thai discourses of 'gayness'. Yet within English language-Thai popular culture, the Thai gay male body is often represented as a highly sexualised, commodified and exoticised site for Western surveillance and consumption. However, this paper is interested in more than the exoticisation of deviance. Thailand is too often theorised merely as the epicentre of sexual excess, prostitution, and HIV/AIDS transmission, as is 'gayness'. This paper posits that this is not a cause (or a majority) but more a symptom of the depolitization of images of 'otherness' which is far removed from the instigation of necessary political change.

While there exists a myriad of both Thai and Australian ‘gay’ media sites with which to conduct textual analyses, this paper focuses specifically on Thai and Australian free-to-(gay) venue magazines, brochures and newspapers including *Thai Guys*, *Gay Max*, *SX National*, and *Out in Perth*. There are three key reasons for this choice. Firstly, these publications are free-to-venue; they do not cost the reader anything over and above the venue’s cover charge (if any). This is likely to encourage a greater volume of readership as well as incur a much broader socio-economic and socially diverse cross-section of Thai, non-Thai, and ‘Western’ readership. Secondly, these publications ‘cater’ for local, expatriate, and tourist (both domestic and international) readers in that they act as a ‘guide’ to gay life within localised or national geo-political spaces. All feature articles, professional photo spreads of models, people posing for photos while patronising venues, venue and event guides, classifieds as well as abundant commercial advertising. Thus, these publications contribute to a ‘gay’ local, national and international cosmology. Examining various issues of these four publications affords a greater appreciation of how (for example) the Sydney gay ‘scene’ differs from that of Perth, how Chiang Mai differs from Bangkok or how Thai ‘gay’ cosmology differs from that of Australia. Thirdly, a textual analysis of *Thai Guys*, *Gay Max*, *SX National*, and *Out in Perth* allows for a greater understanding of how the ‘gay’ male body is constructed and located within Thai and Australian discourses of ‘gayness’ as well as the role readership and authorship plays in these constructions. However, these texts are not metonymic of the plurality of the Thai or Australian ‘gay’ male experience or culture. Indeed many Thai and Australian ‘gay’ men do not frequent ‘gay’ venues nor engage with any ‘gay’ literature at all. Yet

these publications do produce and reproduce cultural symbolism and exemplify how a plurality of identities of both the self and the ‘other’ are constructed.

*Thai Guys* “is published every six weeks and distributed in most major gay venues in Thailand” (2001: 3) and is described as *the* Thai gay newsletter. This broad geographical distribution suggests a large and recurring readership. Despite its national distribution, every article, advertisement, and venue guide within *Thai Guys* is written completely in grammatically perfect English, eschewing the Thai language all together (the significance of this will also be discussed throughout the textual analysis of *GayMax*). This signifies that the readership or target market of *Thai Guys* is restricted to native English speaking tourists, expatriates, or tourists, expatriates and Thai nationals with fluent English language capabilities. While the editor is unidentified, authors contributing articles are Western as is the advertising consultant (<http://www.thaiguys.org>). With no Thai language content, nor Thai editorial staff or authorship, *Thai Guys* is representative of a Western interpretation, construction, and reproduction of ‘gay’ Thailand. That is, *Thai Guys* constructs tropes of Thai ‘gayness’ yet emphasises the gay *farang*’s (Westerner’s) place within them. However, this singular textual interpretation should not be considered a metonymic representation of every ‘gay’ *farang*’s perspective.

*Thai Guys* abundant photographic layouts of *farang* and Thai interacting within urban Thai gay venues offer a means of assessing the disparities between constructions of the Western and Thai ‘gay’ male body. *Thai Guys* does not feature photographs of

non-white or non-Thai bodies and largely ignores women of any nationality. A textual analysis of the Western ‘gay’ men featured within issues 15 and 16 are almost

exclusively middle-aged and overweight. Yet they are consistently photographed embracing one or more Thai ‘boys’. Conversely, Thai ‘gay’ men inhabiting these spaces appear to be uniformly young, boyish, slim, toned, shirtless and usually within close proximity to a *farang* male body. This disparity between race and body construction within *Thai Guys* fuels misguided notions of Thailand as a ‘gay paradise’ (Jackson 1999: 226, Tatchell 1989) where hierarchies of age and body shape do not apply. By positioning the Western body as a minority in relation to the seemingly ubiquitous Thai gay male body, *Thai Guys* affords the aging and overweight *farang* gay male body far more cultural, economic, biological, and racial capital than that of their Thai ‘companions’. *Thai Guys* frames the aging Western body as desirable to and desired by the Thai ‘other’. That is, a *farang*, any *farang*, no matter what his physical appearance is seemingly guaranteed to be spoilt for choice by a bounty of willing and nubile Thai men with whom to interact.

*Thai Guys* features advertisements from a variety of commercial enterprises including restaurants, hotels, travel agencies, and male-male sex venues. *Thai Guys* positioning of the Thai gay male body in relation to its advertising establishes a synonymous relationship between any gay venue and the commercial sex trade to its readership, especially the transitory international tourist unaware of broader Thai gay discourses. The majority of ‘venues’ advertising within *Thai Guys* are a go-go boy clubs, ‘host’ bars, and massage parlours. Typically these advertisements feature semi-clad, slim,

toned Thai boys while boasting “the most handsome a go-go boys especially for you every evening” (*Thai Guys* 2002: 29) and “many handsome boys are waiting for you” (*Thai Guys* 2001: 20). Commercial sex venues are not likely to feature fully clothed, middle aged Thai men in their bid to attract customers. However, most of the photographs of gay *farang* and Thais appearing in *Thai Guys* ‘social pages’ are taken within or directly outside these commercial sex venues. Thus, *Thai Guys* conflates the sex industry with the larger urban Thai gay scene. There is no delineation between the ‘boys waiting especially for you’ and those *farang* are likely to encounter within any commercial (sexual or otherwise) Thai gay venue. Thai boys occupying these spaces are rendered ‘available’. Subsequently, platonic socialising (such as simply ‘hanging out’) between gay *farang* and Thai men becomes less visible, resonant, and relevant within this particular textual construction of the Thai urban gay scene. *Thai Guys* perpetuates stereotypical and incorrect notions of Thai gay culture, which insist, “most of this gay scene revolves around bar boy prostitution which caters for foreign tourists from the West” (Tatchell 1989). The Thai gay male body is subsequently commodified, eroticised, highly sexualised as existing solely to be consumed by Western men with a penchant for ‘Thai’ male flesh. It can be bought, rented or sold for a negotiated price and is constructed as ubiquitous, easily replaceable with a younger, cheaper or more compliant ‘model’. Thus, parallels can be drawn between *Thai Guys* constructions of the Thai gay male body, the Thai gay scene, Western men, and discourses of Orientalism where

for such men, the geopolitical realities of the Orient become a psychic screen on which to project fantasies of illicit sexuality and unbridled excess – including, as Edward Said puts it, “sexual experience unattainable in Europe,” that is, “a different type of sexuality (190). (Boone, 2001: 44)

While Said was referring to colonial Europe as a less than accommodating geo-socio-political space to indulge 'illicit' and 'unbridled' sexual fantasies, *Thai Guys* demonstrates how Thailand (as a metonym for the 'Orient') continues to be perceived by the West as highly sexualised, eroticized, and commodified (Jackson and Cooke 1999: 14). The Thai 'gay' male body is simultaneously reproduced as available, childlike, highly sexualised, small, emasculated, and commodified. Subsequently, some contemporary visions of gay Thailand continue to resonate with Said's observations of Western traditional and colonial constructions of the 'other'. *Thai Guys* depictions of semi-clad, Thai youths seemingly only too eager to be desired by a corpulent, aging Western male suggest Thailand continues to offer "sexual experiences unattainable in Europe". Given Western gay culture's fixation on Anglo-Celtic, youthful, muscular, masculine, and toned bodies, it is unlikely these middle aged and overweight Western men would be surrounded by 'twinks' in such quantity in Australia (Chuang 1999: 32, Jackson and Sullivan 1999: 18, Ayres 1999: 94). Men, who are disempowered and largely invisible within their own gay culture, renegotiate their identity by reasserting their relevance, desirability and superiority within gay discourses of the Thai 'other'. As Brabazon states, it appears that "disempowered groups...use disempowered sites, like popular culture, to renegotiate their social position" (2002: x). Thus, the Thai gay male body, as a site of gay male identity, becomes disempowered when it becomes as equally commodified and exploitable as Thailand's real estate and business opportunities also advertised within *Thai Guys*.

This is not to suggest that Thai gay culture universally suffers under a predominate Western Orientalist gaze; there are a large number of gay clubs and saunas within

Bangkok's urban sphere in which *farang* are unwelcomed, irrelevant, and discriminated against (dreadedned.com, Bunn 2004). Publications such as *The Dove Coos* (Allyn 1992: 9) further suggest that, like male prostitution, interaction with *farang* is only one small aspect of the Thai gay experience or Thai gay male cosmology. *The Dove Coos* is a collection of letters written by individual Thai men detailing homosexual experiences occurring throughout the Thai nation. These letters were originally published in three Thai language national gay magazines and then condensed and translated into a single volume. Considering these letters were originally written in Thai, by Thais, for Thai gay publications, they provide an anecdotal (as opposed to academic) characterization of Thai gay male identity, practices and cosmology. As a text, *The Dove Coos* performs two functions. The first is the erotic entertainment for same-sex attracted men. The second, if one considers the narrative's primary audience, is to perform a pedagogic function; the letters track and teach the dynamic evolution of Thai gay culture and identity to individual readers.

The standard of male attractiveness in among Thai gay men is the muscular, athletic type in his twenties, judging by the models in Thai gay magazines, the most popular gay bars and these stories...Perhaps the most striking of those familiar with Thailand is the absence of stories about a patron relating to barboys. While it often appears to Westerners that the commercial gay sex trade dominates in Thailand these stories are testament to the reality that gay men are interacting socially and sexually with one another. [They] also share the gay subcultural norms about what is exciting (Allyn 1992: 9).

*The Dove Coos* subsequently challenges the relevancy, accuracy, and reality of the representations of Thai gay culture reproduced throughout *Thai Guys*. It essentially commodifies the Thai male gay body. Examining broader discourses of Thai gay male identity questions the impact, positioning, and desirability of the *farang* body while simultaneously demonstrating how 'gay' has been appropriated into a distinctly Thai homosexual male identity.

While *Thai Guys* reproduces Thai gay culture from a *farang* perspective, *Gay Max: Bangkok- Thailand: The Monthly Max for Gay* (Janthanuwat 2002) caters to a more localised readership and has a comparatively more limited distribution. Unlike *Thai Guys*, *Gay Max* features a Thai editor and Thai article writers. Every article is written in Thai, only venue guides and select advertisements are repeated in English. With its abundant Thai language content, *Gay Max* directly hails and engages with Thai gay men. Like *The Dove Coos*, *Gay Max* largely ignores Western or expatriate constructions of Thai gay discourses and thus further demonstrates how ‘gay’ has been renegotiated into a distinctly Thai male identity. *Gay Max* is a more article based publication, offering its readership a much wider choice of subject matter than *Thai Guys* and creates a more detailed and comprehensive vision of Bangkok gay life. Feature articles discuss everything from sauna conferences, charity beauty pageants, *kathoeys* hosted award nights, restaurant reviews, Horoscopes, and venue guides.

While language hails a predominantly Thai readership, *Gay Max* further distances itself from *farang* (de)constructions of Thai gayness through its representations and positioning of the Thai gay male body. With its cover photo and centrefold of two naked Thai gay men, *Gay Max* is more explicit than *Thai Guys*. The numerous photographs depict the two bronzed, muscular young men engaging in a muscle-flexing tug of war, embracing one another, as well as asleep together. However, rather than exoticising the Thai male body, both the cover and centrefold layout reiterate the heightened masculinity of the Thai male gay body, its strength, athleticism, grace and movement. It demonstrates the beauty of the communion of two male Thai bodies locked in passionate embrace and reiterates the desirability of



the Thai gay male body for a predominantly Thai gay male audience. Unlike *Thai Guys*, *Gay Max* does not attempt to position the Thai gay male body in relation to the Western body. It does not place the two within a hierarchy, it simply ignores the *farang* body (and largely, readership) altogether. *Gay Max* promotes one commercial 'sex' venue, 'The Banana Fitness Club'. However, its massage services are no more prominently advertised than its gym or restaurant facilities. That is, there is far less emphasis or commercial endorsement of male-male sex venues than appears in *Thai Guys*. *Gay Max* seemingly supports Allyn's (1992: 9) argument that the commercial sex industry is far more predominant in and relevant to Western constructions of Thai 'gayness'.

Whereas *Thai Guys* routinely casts the Thai gay male body as sexually passive in relation to the Western body, *Gay Max* constructs a more comprehensive, inclusive, yet distinctly Thai model of Thai gay male identity. With photos of *kathoey* interspersed with muscular, masculine Thai males and those that fall somewhere in between, *Gay Max* incorporates traditional as well as more recently emerged tropes of Thai 'gayness' (Jackson 1996). For example, the Thai male 'beauty' pageant photographs feature young men judged on their musculature, grace and attractiveness as opposed to their exoticness, youth, or willingness to please the Western 'other'. The plurality of gay identities represented within this publication exemplifies an active Thai cultural *appropriation* and renegotiation of 'gay' as an identity rather than the passive *infiltration* or *colonisation* of a globalised/Western derived 'gay' identity. Thai gay discourses can and do exist outside of the Western gaze and Western body.

Thai gay men predominantly can, do, and will find each other sexually attractive and compatible.

Australian gay popular culture further supports the argument that ‘gay’ is always a culturally specific rather than a singular, globalised identity. For example, just as Thai gay men reduce myriad Caucasian nationalities into the collective *farang*, the Thai gay male body (within the Australian gay community particularly), becomes categorised as ‘Asian’.

The term “Asian” is also used in culturally and insensitive and racist ways. When used in a racially discriminatory manner people from very different countries and cultures tend to be lumped together by this term, homogenized and dismissed under the umbrella of otherness (Ridge, Hee, and Minichiello 1999: 48).

This is not to suggest that Thai gay men use *farang* any more politely. As demonstrated in the textual analyses of *Gay Max* and *Thai Guys*, the presence of the Western gay male body often carries with it connotations of prostitution. Similar to *Gay Max*, Australian free-to-venue gay publications *SX National* (Taylor) and *Out in Perth* (Bluett) largely ignore the body of the ‘other’. Despite claiming to be “Australia/New Zealand’s first community, free-to-street gay publication (Taylor Launch Issue March 2003: 5) *SX National* has featured no more than three non-Caucasian cover models in its twenty one monthly issue history (Taylor issue 3 May 2003, issue 11 February 2004, issue 16 July 2004). The ‘Asian’ body remains significantly under-represented within *SX National*’s particular gay ‘community’. Despite the ever-increasing numbers of young gay ‘Asian’ men on Australia’s gay ‘scene’ (Ridge, Hee, and Minichiello 1999: 49), the gay ‘Asian’ body remains

relatively and routinely invisible in both *SX National*'s and *OUT in Perth*'s 'scene out' social pages.

Despite their 'free-to-venue' status, *OUT in Perth* and *SX National* must cater to and perpetuate what is desirable if they are to retain and expand readership and advertising revenue. Readership and revenue are possible reasons for Australia's lack of gay Asian role models and why "most gay media portray a White or Anglo person, who may fit certain conceptions of the community's ideal gay person but perhaps not most gays" (Sanitioso 1999: 77). While *OUT in Perth* actively hails a broad range of *queer* identities, it does not attempt to appeal to or identify with non-Caucasian *racial* identities. Thus, the LGBTIQ (Bluett 2004: 3) or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex and queer community is framed as uniformly Caucasian.

Both Thai and Australian gay popular culture mobilise 'gay' through cultural and subcultural norms, values and ideologies. The 'gay' male body remains a site of contestation in both Australia and Thailand; both nations ascribe different values on different bodies at different times. Popular culture, its readership, and authorship play vital roles in the construction, reproduction, and positioning of these bodies within cultural and subcultural norms. *Gay Max* and *The Dove Coos* suggest the majority of Thai gay men in Thailand are not interested in the Caucasian male body. That is, in Thailand, a 'real' boyfriend is another Thai, a sentiment echoed within *SX National* and *OUT in Perth*, which suggests that there is little or no interaction between Caucasian and Asian gay male bodies. Interaction between the Australian/Caucasian

and Thai/Asian body has not been favourably received within Australian gay popular culture. The Caucasian/Asian couple are colloquially and derogatorily comprised of a 'rice queen' (the Caucasian gay male who likes Asian men) and the 'potato queen' (the Asian gay male who likes Caucasian men). The rice queen is usually constructed as older and unable to interest a young, masculine, Caucasian ideal or 'real' boyfriend and thus turns to the 'Asian' gay body for sex and companionship. The potato queen is somewhat misconstrued as settling as close to the Australian gay ideal relationship as possible through having a Caucasian (though older) boyfriend.

The gay male body remains a site of semiotic meaning, simultaneously empowered and disempowered. The omission of the Western gay male body in *Gay Max* and *The Dove Coos* challenges notions of a universal 'coveting' of the Western gay body by the non-Western 'other', or of the transnational beauty and desirability of the Caucasian male gay body, just as it challenges the existence of a universal singular Western gay identity. *Thai Guys* positions the Caucasian male gay body as centrally important to Thai discourses of gayness but suggests that these aging, overweight men must pay for that privilege. Yet, *Out in Perth*, *SX National*, and *Gay Max* eschew the body of the 'other' completely. Subsequently, a textual analysis of Thai and Australian gay popular culture reiterates how 'gay', as an identity, remains fluid, dynamic, and always culturally and historically idiosyncratic.

By mobilising the similarities (while respecting the differences) of national and international gay discourses, this paper seeks to inhibit fragmentation of popular renditions of 'gayness' which has been a major hindrance to political change. If

Australian gay men hope to create a unified politically proactive gay movement, they must place less ideological weight on physical and cultural differences with the non-Caucasian gay 'other' and consolidate cross-cultural similarities. Just as Thai gay men have appropriated Western gay identities to renegotiate their social position, so must the Australian gay community go beyond the Caucasian gay male body as a metonym for all things Australian and gay. Australian gay men need a shared interest to destabilise hegemonic power structures that actively marginalise non-heteronormative sexualities and identities. Only temporarily unifying through diversity can gay men hope to make Australian mainstream, heteronormative society look at 'gay' from a macro political perspective. Non-heterosexual identities are too often framed in popular culture as shiny, sexy, exotic products, and as surface appeasement to liberal democratic ideals. True political change is possible if Australian gay men can move 'gayness' beyond its status as a niche market, or a popular cultural consumable.

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