

Queering Asian-American Masculinities in David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly" and Ocean Vuong's "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous"

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The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Asian-American masculinity has been a critical topic in cross-cultural studies as well as gender studies. Previous studies have relied on the historical context to examine the Asian-American masculinities in contemporary literature. However, not much attention has been given to the transformation of queering Asian masculinity in contemporary literature. By analysing David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), this research examines the movement of queering Asian masculinity in contemporary texts between the twentieth century and the twenty-first century. Drawing on Judith Butler's ideas on the performance of gender and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, this research will focus on how do Hwang and Vuong present the relationship between queer body and gender in the context of Asian-American masculinity? To what extent do both authors question traditional gender assumptions and renegotiate the value of masculinity? How does the topic of Asian-American masculinity shift in David Henry Hwang's *M Butterfly* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*? By taking a close look at the descriptions of the protagonists' bodies and their performativity in both texts, this research considers how Hwang starts to reveal the Asian-American body covertly, whilst Vuong queers the Asian-American body in a more overt way to embrace the possibilities of hybrid Asian gender identities in contemporary Asian American contexts.

Keywords: Asian-American Masculinity, *M Butterfly*, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Hybrid Asian-American Gender Identities

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Introduction

Asian-American masculinity has been a critical topic in cross-cultural studies as well as gender studies. Previous research has relied on examining the historical context in order to deconstruct Asian-American masculinity through various literary works. However, not much attention has been given to the transformation of queering Asian-American masculinity. By focusing on the Asian-American bodies in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), this research will analyse the movement of queering Asian-American masculinity in two centuries. Although Hwang's *M. Butterfly* was published in the twentieth century and Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a more recent publication, these two texts reveal distinct approaches to queering Asian-American male bodies. To demonstrate the contrast of queering masculinity between these two texts, this research will shed light on the shift in the protagonists' bodies by zooming in on some dialogues and content. Meanwhile, this research considers that how do Hwang and Vuong present the relationship between queer body and gender in the context of Asian-American masculinity? To what extent do both authors question traditional gender assumptions and renegotiate the value of masculinity? How does the topic of Asian-American masculinity shift in David Henry Hwang's *M Butterfly* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*? This paper will conclude by examining the impact of changing representations of the Asian-American bodies in the twentieth century and twenty-first century in Asian-American literature through these two texts. To frame these analyses, Raewyn Connell's definition of masculinity as "the patterns of practice" (Connell, 2005, p. 832) by males and females will be utilised, highlighting the dynamics of masculinities in society. The view of hegemonic masculinity, which explains men's power over women, will be used to explain how a character conforms to traditional gender roles expected of men, revealing how the writer demonstrates a disruption of the fixed notion of masculinity. Furthermore, Judith Butler describes gender and body as always being understood as "citational repetition" (Leitch, 2010, p. 2374). She believes that the relationship between the body and gender is a social construction. In her article, she argues that gender is performative. It is "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Butler's theoretical framework will inform the analysis of how the author offers insights into the hidden gender and sexual melancholy, as well as the ongoing inner struggles of the protagonists, to shape the journey toward becoming gendered characters. Therefore, this research suggests that Hwang covertly queers the Asian-American body, while Vuong overtly embraces the possibilities of hybrid Asian-American gender identities in contemporary Asian American contexts.

The Metamorphosis of Asian-American Bodies

In *M Butterfly* (1988), Hwang blurs gender boundaries and opens up the topic of queerness to straddle boundaries between cultures, gender roles, and sexual identities, while Vuong deconstructs problematic binary oppositions in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). To challenge the idea that gender is a fixed and immutable characteristic, Hwang gives various hints at the ambiguous nature of gender boundaries in the play. One of the key moments in the play is a conversation between Chin and the protagonist, Song, in which Chin expresses disapproval of his friend, Song wearing a dress. This conversation serves as a highlight of questioning the concept of traditional gender norms and gender roles for the readers, which also allows them to consider the rigidity of traditional gender roles. Additionally, Hwang deliberately implies the issue of the protagonists' gender identities and appearance to allow

the readers who should rethink the gender norm and construct a space to re-establish traditional boundaries around the male body. Another hint is a costume transformation scene,

(Galliard exits, Song turns to us). The change I'm going to make requires about five minutes..... I'll be there, when you return, right where you left me. (Song goes to a mirror in front of which is a wash basin of water. She starts to remove her makeup as stage lights go to half and houselights come up). (Hwang, 1988, p. 59)

Through this costume transformation scene, Hwang leaves an issue to the readers to expand the gender boundaries by themselves. As Song who is wearing the female customs and acting as a female character at the beginning of this play, she starts to remove her clothes and makeup. After that, Hwang takes the readers or audience to another court scene, where Song is in a suit. The transformation of the costume implies that gender, body, and appearance are performative as well as a performance. It is a moment to stop and think of Song's gender. First, Hwang invites the readers to consider how gender is constructed, influenced, and performed within specific cultural and societal contexts. According to Judith Butler (1988), gender is a performance that is "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts" (p. 519). This moment in the play becomes a pause for reflection on the themes of gender and the body. Second, Hwang hints to the readers to consider gender norms as a symbol of judgment issue, which adeptly guides the audience to contemplate the staunch rigidity of social norms. In the play, although Hwang has not furthered to address all these gender issues, he serves as an opening of a discussion on these topics and encourages audiences to question existing norms. Similarly, Vuong (2019) bombarded with gender boundaries by depicting queering Asian bodies in his novel, deconstructing problematic binary oppositions and interrogating societal norms and power structures, the changing body is shown in the soliloquy of the protagonist,

I turn the shower off and, instead of toweling and dressing before the steam on the door mirror cleared, like I normally would, I waited. It was an accident, my beauty revealed to me. I was day dreaming, thinking about the day before, of Trevor and me behind the Chevy, and had stood in the tub with the water off for so long. (p.107)

The narrator or protagonist, nicknamed Little Dog, stands in front of a mirror, no longer plagued by doubts about his body; instead, he cherishes and loves it. Through a sudden movement, Vuong offers a diversification of queer masculinities. Little Dog who is taught to be "a real boy and be strong" (Vuong, 2019, p. 26) unexpectedly discovers the beauty of his body through the act of self-reflection in the mirror. Vuong directly describes the protagonist tries to break down the rules and stereotypical assumptions of gender and masculinity in Asian- American society through one moment.

Questioning Traditional Gender Assumptions and Renegotiating the Value of Masculinity

By portraying protagonists' fluid sexual identities, Hwang starts a disruption of the fixed notion of masculinity, while Vuong's exploration and embrace of diverse sexual identities and expressions not only challenges societal norms but also offers an individual understanding of masculinity. According to Connell (2005), Hegemonic masculinity is the idea of the dominant and stereotypical concept of masculinity. It is constructed based on two main pillars: the domination of women and a hierarchy of dominance among men. It is also influenced by the stigmatization of homosexuality. This concept affects how young

males are socialised and the expectations placed upon them in society. In *M Butterfly* (1988), Hwang highlights Gallimard's earlier heterosexuality experience with a girl and depicts Gallimard conforming to traditional gender roles expected of a man. He shows that Gallimard attempts to exert control over a woman, seeking satisfaction in his perception of masculinity during their sexual relationship. Throughout the play, Hwang delves into the complexities of Gallimard's sexual identity, constantly exploring the internal struggle he faces. At Act 3, scene 2, Hwang (1988) presents a conversation between Song and Gallimard in the paddy wagon where Gallimard admits falling in love with "a woman [who] created by a man" (p.66). This conversation marks a turning point of the protagonist's sexual identity as well as serves as a resounding alert to Gallimard. Until the end of the play, the struggle of Gallimard's sexual identification is continues to be explored. By setting the prison as the stage for Gallimard's performance and allowing him to become the character of Madam Butterfly. Hwang depicts Gallimard ends with committing suicide in the prison when he realises his desire for Song will forever live in conflict with the pathological disgust for himself that he cannot remove. The journey from a heteronormative perspective to a deep personal exploration of one's sexual identity is a thought-provoking theme in the play. Hwang unpacked the complex dynamics between compulsory heterosexuality and a male role, challenging the normative behaviour and preconceived notions associated with masculinity. Similar connotations attend the presence of another protagonist Song, who is always reminded of the societal expectations placed upon him to conform to traditional masculinity and heterosexuality by his friend, Chin. The term "comrade"(Hwang, 1988, p.39), which always appears in their conversations. Comrade is a term that contains two explanations in Chinese, while it historically represents the communist party in China, which is an imply of a society, it also holds significance within the homosexual community, referred to the pronunciation as "Tongzhi" during the 1980s and 1990s in China. In the conversation, Chin ends the conversation by saying there is no homosexuality in China. Hwang intentionally offers a dual meaning of the term comrade to make the readers reconsider a male role and socially constructed role. When Chin mentions that "Don't forget: there is no homosexuality in China" (Hwang, 1988, p.39). He expects Song to follow this rule. Hwang's portrayal and implantation of both protagonists invite readers to question traditional notions of sexual identities as well as societal expectations of masculinity. Although Hwang raises significant and thought-provoking questions about the construction of sexual identities and a male role, it is important to note that these inquiries are not explicitly addressed within the narrative. Thus, the portrayal in the play serves as a beginning of questioning traditional gender assumptions. Vuong's portrayal in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* takes a different approach. To explore diverse sexual identities, Vuong demonstrates a character's understanding of one sexual identity through the description of a sexual relationship between two protagonists." Nguyen Hoàng (2014) argues that "bottomhood is an ethical manner of relating to others, not through dominance and mastery (p.2)". He mentioned that "(i)n a patriarchal society, to bottom is akin to being penetrated and dominated like a woman" (p.9). In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), Little Dog, an Asia-American boy is forced into a role of bottom by his white boyfriend during their sexual behaviour. Thinking that should accept this position because "the rules" (Vuong, 2019, p.120) were already inside them. Vuong depicts every episode of the relationship between Little Dog and Trevor, as a gay Asian-American man, Little Dog accepts the bottom position as well as an expected femininity in the society. Hwang describes that Little Dog chooses to learn to say "harder" (Vuong, 2019, p. 119) when he is having sex with Trevor. However, he releases that is "a kind of power" (p.118). By Zooming this queer sexual intimacy of the characters, Vuong not only straddles boundaries between Asian-

American bodies and subjects but also allows readers the opportunity to renegotiate the value of Asian masculinity.

The Shift and Impact Between Hwang's *M Butterfly* (1988) and Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) in the Twentieth Century and the Twenty-First Century

Although Hwang and Vuong's works reflect the attitudes surrounding gender identity and Asian-American masculinity in contemporary Asian-American contexts, Hwang covertly queers the Asian-American body, while Vuong overtly embraces the possibilities of hybrid Asian gender identities. In the play, Hwang depicts the hidden gender and sexual melancholy of the protagonist by shedding light on Gallimard's ongoing inner struggles. First, Hwang (1988) portrays Gallimard as someone who has "never been considered witty or clever" (p.8) until Song appears in his life. Therefore, Hwang (1988) highlights that Gallimard is a guy who has lack of confidence during his younger years. When it comes to approaching women, he will "never ask" (p.12) whether the girl likes him or not. Additionally, Hwang clandestinely delves into the concept of masculinity, illustrating how Gallimard's worth as a man is tied to conforming to exaggerated gender roles and traditional expectations of behaviour. Even at the play's conclusion, Hwang sets Gallimard on a path of self-effacement, indicating that the struggle about his sexual confusion never ends. His struggle with his self-image and sexual confusion may continue indefinitely. Dorinne Kondo states (1990) that Hwang demonstrates "the inner space of selfhood" (p. 17) of the protagonist via the play. Gallimard's experience and struggle suggest a hidden link when the Hwang skilfully incorporates the transformation of the Asia American body into the play. Second, Gallimard's case can adopt Butler's "melancholic identification" (Butler, 1995, p.169). The process by which an individual's ego develops into a gendered character. Butler (1995) points out that the social norm, which forbids homosexuality, mirrors the process described in her work. This norm was particularly noticeable during the time of publication, but it still exists. By dragging as Madam Butterflies, Gallimard could identify the "ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis" (Butler, 1995, p.169). Third, Hwang describes that Gallimard's sexual relationship and his identity are based on myths. This myth serves as Gallimard's social mechanism that controls the male fantasy of possessing a woman, which in turn shapes and strengthens masculine identity. This reliance on fantasy disconnects Gallimard from reality. As Hwang in his interview admits that the audiences may "prefer the fantasy over the reality (Hwang & DiGaetani, 1989, p. 143) these fantasies subtly transform his perception of his own body throughout the play. This interplay between fantasy and reality highlights the complex dynamics within Gallimard's psyche. Hwang depicts and examines the representation of the Asian American body in a covert manner in the play through these hidden gender and sexual melancholy. On the other hand, in "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," Vuong paints a vivid portrait of Little Dog's struggles with his identity as a gay son of Vietnamese refugees. Little Dog's experience is marked by a double negation, as he is not only marginalised by society for his ethnicity and sexuality but is also met with shame and rejection from his own family and community. Despite this, Little Dog can openly find beauty and strength in his own body. By sharing a letter between his mother and himself, as well as through his refusal to accept these discourses, Little Dog is able to break free from this and explore his own identity on his own terms. At the beginning of the novel, Little Dog writes "Let me begin again" (Vuong, 2019, p. 3) and "Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you — even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong, 2019, p.3). The beginning of Little Dog's letter reveals a deep longing within the protagonist to share his experiences with his mother. Jennifer Cho (2022) suggests that this letter is a way "to reconcile the narrative gaps between mother and

son" (p.130) and "Vietnamese and English," (p.130) as well as "past and present" (p.130). In the letter, he shares the protagonist's conflict experienced by Vietnamese refugees within the American community. In another part of the letter, Vuong highlights Little Dog coming out as gay to his mother. Through these two exchanges, Vuong emphasises that when the protagonist is in the darkest of times, there is a light within his life. Little Dog sees the body as both beautiful and a reflection of its rich history. Despite encountering struggles, continues to appreciate the beauty of his body, thus embodying a sense of hope in his life. Yet, the letter functions as a vulnerable expression of his own sense of self and the journey towards embracing and loving one's own body. The letter also expresses his deepest thoughts and feelings. By using different narrative styles, Hwang and Vuong's works reflect the shifting attitudes towards gender identity and Asian-American masculinity in the twentieth century and the twenty-first centuries.

Conclusion

By analysing both Hwang and Vuong's works, this research points out that Hwang's play covertly subverts and challenges traditional notions of Asian-American masculinity, while Vuong's work expression overtly embraces and amplifies the potential for hybrid and fluid gender identities within contemporary Asian-American contexts. Hwang opens up gender boundaries and explores queerness across cultures, gender roles, and sexual identities. By showing a dialogue between the characters, Hwang brings attention to the issue of questioning and challenging the concept of traditional gender norms and roles. Furthermore, Hwang's use of a costume transformation scene leaves the issue of gender boundaries open to interpretation by the readers or audience, allowing them to explore and expand their understanding of gender roles and expectations. Through a soliloquy, Vuong creates the dynamic transformation of the protagonist's body throughout the narrative. He offers an exploration of gender, race, and sexuality that prompts readers to reconsider the definition of the Asia-American body and masculinity. Besides, Hwang disrupts the fixed notion of masculinity by portraying characters with fluid sexual identities. He explores Gallimard's internal struggle with his sexual identity, delving into its complexities and intricacies. Through his intricate portrayal of Gallimard's journey from conforming to heteronormative perspectives to exploring his own sexual identity, Hwang explores the complex relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and societal expectations of male roles. In contrast to Vuong's portrayal, which aims to deconstruct heteronormativity and redefine societal norms surrounding sexual identity, Vuong demonstrates an understanding of sexual identity and the character's body by showcasing the sexual relationship between the two protagonists. This sexual relationship is a way to show the challenges of societal norms surrounding masculinity and heteronormativity. By revealing the hidden gender and sexual melancholy of the protagonists, this research contends that although both Hwang and Vuong's works reflect contemporary attitudes toward gender identity and Asian-American masculinity. Hwang utilises myths and internal exploration as a covert means to depict a changing Asian American body in the play. However, Vuong's approach can be described as a blend of openness and vulnerability. Little Dog's letter is a sharing of his life, struggle as well as his history, allowing him to openly share his thoughts, feelings, and experiences with his mother. It is important to note that through the use of a letter-style narrative, Vuong shows that the author overtly embraces and explores the potential for hybrid Asian gender identities. The novel provides a platform for the reader to rethink the complexities of gender, sexual and queer identity within the Asian-American community. These two works of Hwang and Vuong reveal the shifting attitudes towards the body and Asian-American masculinity in contemporary contexts. Hwang and Vuong's works offer

important insights into the fluidity and complexity of hybrid gender identity, and highlight the high potential for queer Asian-American experiences to be explored during the twentieth century and the twenty-first centuries in the future.

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