Comparative Queer Southeast Asian Studies

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Ongoing social relations in lowland Southeast Asian societies are based on hierarchical understandings: they are predicated on mutual interdependence through difference. Difference, in this view, always makes a difference. Every difference will have social consequences. LGBT activists mounting campaigns against legal discrimination insist that non-normative gender and sexuality should make no difference. Yet many queer Southeast Asians prefer activities, such as drag shows, in which people compete to distinguish themselves—to instate differences in standing—over efforts to win similar rights for everyone. A growing backlash against queer people appears to stem from their demands for recognition without discrimination: the reprisals are against claims that queerness should make no difference.

Ward Keeler is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. A specialist in Southeast Asia, the first part of his career was based on the study of social relations and the performing arts in Java and Bali, two islands in the nation of Indonesia. More recently, he has done research on Buddhism, gender, and the arts, in Burma. His recent publications include a book, The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma (University of Hawaii Press. He has also produced CD’s of Burmese classical music, and published his annotated translation of the Indonesian novel entitled Durga Umayi. His textbook for the Burmese language, coauthored with Allen Lyan, is currently in press at the Hong Kong University Press.

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12:00 Noon
Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue