



Coming Out of My Skin

Jean-Baptiste Phou

Edward Gauvin, Translator

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Jean-Baptiste Phou's frank memoir *Coming Out of My Skin* functions as an impassioned manifesto against anti-Asian racism, which—in Phou's experience—has been even more pernicious than homophobia.

Phou, whose Chinese parents lived in Cambodia and dispersed after the Khmer Rouge, was born in Paris in the early 1980s. He knew he was attracted to boys by the time he was ten and heard his mother's refrain "You will marry a Chinese girl." The "taboos and hierarchies deep within" his family foreshadowed the prejudice he experienced as a gay Asian man traveling the world for careers in finance and the arts.

In Martinique, Barcelona, and Taipei, Phou experienced a variety of cultures and met BIPOC boyfriends of different backgrounds (herein, the details of his sexual conquests are somewhat gratuitous). His book takes aim at sexual stereotypes specific to Asian men: small penis size linked to general sexlessness; within homosexual circles, effeminacy and passive roles. Through his teenage experimentation with Paris's Marais district gay bars and pre-internet dating services, he learned that "Sorry, not into Asians" was a common stipulation, often framed as a matter of taste.

When he quit his banking job in Singapore and moved to Cambodia to act in a musical comedy, Phou again observed inherent biases; he came to believe that he was rejected for roles because he was Asian. He expresses a sense of responsibility to speak for and represent Asian people; and he extrapolates to comment on gender itself: "A man is a fragile thing ... the very concept of manliness is a hoax."

With an abrupt ending to match the ongoing crisis of toxic masculinity, *Coming Out of My Skin* is a personal, forthright memoir that addresses anti-Asian discrimination, including in the LGBTQ+ community.

REBECCA FOSTER (September / October 2023)

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