

Critical Bottoming: Repositioning Male Effeminacy and its Racialization

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Nguyen Tan Hoang. *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 287 pp.

The figure of the gay, Asian bottom is often misunderstood. His racial, gender, and sexual identities are typically conflated and maligned for being too submissive and effeminate. This, at least, is the opening contention of Nguyen Tan Hoang's *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Opposite this caricature, Nguyen offers a recuperative reading of the figure of the gay Asian bottom.¹ In this monograph, part of Duke University Press's *Perverse Modernities* series, Nguyen develops the idea of "critical bottoming" in order to upend the sedentary meaning of this figure's markers. In the process, Nguyen's book offers an intersectional approach to the complex relations of gender and race through the axes of sexual representation and practice.

In his first chapter, "The Rise, and Fall, of a Gay Asian American Porn Star," Nguyen presents a case study of the first gay Asian porn star in an American context, Brandon Lee.² Lee's rise to fame, Nguyen argues, derives from his assimilationist presentation, 'large endowment,' and exclusive role as the top in his porn videos. Nguyen provocatively suggests that Lee's fame was made possible because it rebuked the negative associations Asian men had accrued throughout the late twentieth century. However,

¹ Nguyen sees his own reading as importantly not offering "redress and reparation" but rather granting the capacity to learn "to live with past and present danger, in particular, everyday injuries marked by gender, race, and sexuality, that cannot find relief or make amends through legitimate social or political means" (25). In this spirit, and as he invokes later, this book carries forward Jose Munoz's project of disidentification developed in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

² This chapter expands his earlier essay "The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star," which appears in the influential collection *Porn Studies* (edited in 2004 by Linda Williams).

the pornography Lee appears in also problematically presumes a viewing subject who is always interpellated as a white gay male. Nguyen's essay version of this chapter resolved this interpellation by calling for a counterpornography to attend to the Asian immigrant as a desiring subject (252), but since then, Brandon Lee's growing porn career has necessitated an expanded analysis. Not only has Lee come to bottom, but his newer films feature him as an egotistical diva and as villain, replete with exaggerated Asian dialect (practices that Nguyen calls "yellow yellowface").³ Nguyen develops the concept of an "accented pornography" to understand what might otherwise be dismissed as racist gestures; in his account, accented pornography self-reflexively makes the gay Asian male immigrant-subject central to the pornographic fantasy scenarios (61- 69).⁴ Furthermore, accented pornography ironizes and critiques Asian stereotypes by exploiting power differentials, which, for Nguyen, results in an unsettling of their rigidity (69).

In "Reflections on an Asian Bottom," Nguyen turns to Hollywood and the pre-Stonewall film *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) to unpack the associations between Asian and anus, and in the process, the desirability of effeminacy. This second chapter hinges upon the minor character Anacleto, an effeminate Filipino houseboy, whose affective bond with his lady of the house, over-the-top sissyness, and premature departure from the film have left him overlooked by most film criticism. However, Nguyen argues that it is precisely through coming to terms with Anacleto's pronounced gender inversion that the protagonist, Penderton, fatefully decides to pursue his own homoerotic desire. In effect, Anacleto's retreat from the film reorients the film's trajectory. Chapter two broadens our understanding of the bottom beyond the sexual act and moves us into the realms of aesthetics, narratology, and affect. Additionally, Nguyen clarifies the stakes of his argument by way of Vito Russo's seminal text *The Celluloid Closet*, wherein Russo dismisses Anacleto as a regressive portrait of a gay man in the sexological tradition of the invert (73-74). The progressive post-Stonewall politics of gay liberation through greater visibility coincided with an intensification of butch masculinity, a masculinity Anacleto refused (79-80). Nguyen shows how once he disappears from the film, Anacleto's affects haunt us through what he calls an "anal vision" that Penderton adopts. This form of vision offers an alternative to film theory's notion of the male gaze that penetrates and masters objects but rather gives itself over to reflection and distraction. Aligning the titular "golden eye" to Anacleto, which then reflects upon Penderton, this "anal vision" names a passive way of seeing that honors desperation, hysteria, and vulnerability over modes of

³ Nguyen utilizes this concept from Yiman Wang's essay "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era."

⁴ The idea of "accented pornography" pays homage to Hamid Naficy's theory of an "accented cinema" in *An Accented Cinema: Exile and Diasporic Filmmaking*.

objectification more entrenched in stereotypical masculinity (104).

Chapter three, “*The Lover’s ‘Gorgeous Ass,’*” develops an extended analysis of the 1992 film *The Lover*, which tells the tale of a wealthy Chinese heir’s torrid romance with a young French girl in 1929 Saigon. Here Nguyen argues that “soft” masculinity is conferred upon and naturalized across Asian male sexual representation, queering even heterosexual men. In terms of production and filmic diegesis, this chapter moves outside of the explicit American idiom and into a French colonial era of Vietnam, but Nguyen reads its reception from within an American context to see how transnational circulations of Asian masculinity operate. Chapter three argues that the spectacularization of the male lead’s uncovered buttocks (that “gorgeous ass”) throughout the film operates as a fetish object for his unseen penis, but also as a site of vulnerability. Tracing the systemic logic of cinema’s emphasis on the male derriere, Nguyen parses distinctions in this substitution through a contrast with the fetishization of black men’s rear ends and penises (142-144). In contrast, the Asian men appear only to have butts. Chapter three compellingly interrogates interracial desire’s complicated relationship to colonial contexts and its navigation of racial and sexual shame, a concern Nguyen follows for the remainder of the monograph.

In the fourth chapter, “The Politics of Starch,” Nguyen engages further into the politics of interracial desire by restaging a debate between two camps of filmmaking: Asian diasporic documentaries on the one hand and queer experimental videos on the other. In the first camp, Nguyen argues that, in response to pornographic representations of Asian men in the 1990s, many documentary films undertook a project of “reeducating” gay Asian men’s desire, advocating against the objectification of Asian men in interracial pairings by instead promoting “sticky rice” (Asian-Asian) relationships (155).⁵ He complicates this position by presenting a group of queer experimental videographers who foregrounded the subjugating pleasures of bottoming, which he reads as a rebuke to the disciplinary call to intra-Asian desire. These experimental queer videos also question the previous camp’s privileging of “sticky rice” by enumerating a vast array of determinants that also inform the politics of desire. Ultimately, Nguyen cautions against universalizing progress narratives that saturate minoritarian politics, specifically trajectories from “shame to pride, from femininity to masculinity, from bottomhood to topness” as though topness, masculinity, and pride were equivalent and redemptive (190). Rather, Nguyen makes space for the possibility of dwelling in abject bottomhood to promote its disidentificatory affinities and alliances. The refusal of progress narratives disrupts the typical impulse to transform abjection into empowerment, objects into subjects, or in this case, bottoms

⁵ Nguyen makes use of “the reeducation of desire” from Richard Dyer’s essay “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography.”

into tops; Nguyen's project does not care for a future orientations as much as it dwells in and circles around the past, and in this regard, embraces Elizabeth Freeman's queer approach to temporality, which may prove challenging to more future-oriented critical tendencies within Asian American Studies.⁶

The conclusion to *A View From the Bottom* moves us away from film and video and into the realm of cruising websites and mobile apps. The book's primary intervention, which combats heteronormative protocols of strict gendered and racialized sexuality, here critiques the homogenizing violence of homonormativity. Citing from Juana Maria Rodriguez's conceptualization of the "butch femme," Nguyen "seek[s] to expand the boundaries of top-bottom to envelop multiple subject positions" (195). We move beyond the more static receptions of video and cinema and into the practices of everyday life. Here Nguyen reveals how gay Asian men navigate racism while cruising online with techniques like obfuscation, tactical masking, and self-satirizing screen names (198-203). These tactics lead Nguyen to conclude that "the Asian American male subject draws on the force of abjection and shame in his assumption of bottomhood; but he also productively harnesses the power of shaming mechanisms by performing to the hilt the 'improper joy' of Asian American male subjection" (204).

A View From the Bottom issues a major corrective to gay, white male criticism that dominated early queer theory, which becomes a fulcrum to the rest of Nguyen's project.⁷ In the introduction, Nguyen contends that queer theory reclaims the bottom position through a process of remasculinization, a process with which he takes issue.⁸ To Nguyen, remasculinization plays into the protocols of heteronormativity by distancing or denouncing the effeminate resonances of the bottom position. Within this camp of early gay male theorists, Leo Bersani receives the most attention for his groundbreaking essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" but Nguyen's accusation that Bersani is remasculinizing elides some of the complexity of Bersani's argument and its relationship to the AIDS crisis.⁹ In fact, Bersani is less normative in his queer theory

⁶ Here I refer to Elizabeth Freeman's book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*.

⁷ Nguyen names Guy Hocquenghem, Leo Bersani, D.A. Miller, Lee Edelman, and later Tim Dean and David Halperin within this camp (6 – 14).

⁸ Nguyen develops this term from Yvonne Tasker (1997), who introduces it to describe the manner in which martial arts star Bruce Lee (from whom the porn star Brandon Lee hopes to share allegiance with his nom de plume) stands in as a remasculinized figuration of Chinese national identity. Soft masculinity in essence transforms into hard masculinity through martial arts (33-35).

⁹ Nguyen cites feminist thinkers who have taken issue with Bersani's essay, notably Mandy Merck and Tania Modleski, who find Bersani's figuration men "behaving

than Nguyen gives credit, although certainly the essay is not unproblematic. Where Nguyen's argument could have found a stronger point of entry through this essay is in Bersani's sometimes uncomfortable comparison of the racially-unspecified gay subject's plight as more oppressed than the black subject's, which would have provided a generative site to reconsider the assumptions of race and the bottom position.

A View from the Bottom compellingly argues for an intersectional analysis of sexuality, but Nguyen's feminism also warrants attention, both for the manner in which it comes to arbitrate other fields, but also for how it fails to become a site of examination itself. In his introduction, Nguyen locates *A View from the Bottom's* core discourses as "Asian American studies, queer studies, and film studies" (2), but to make many of his most noteworthy arguments, Nguyen relies upon feminist critiques. It is, after all, the notion of the "butch femme" that helps to make the case for bottoming as capacious and revelatory precisely for its vulnerability. It is also a feminist critique of Bersani's essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" that Nguyen harnesses to cast the earlier era of bottom theory as inadequate and remasculinizing. The mode of feminist thought invoked here appears to be "sex positive feminism," that branch of feminism which famously fought the sex wars in the 1980s and which empowered women "on their backs" (61), but *A View from the Bottom* fails to name it as such. I begin to wonder how the gay Asian bottom might illuminate or indeed reeducate a feminist epistemology, a question that could have helped to ground a project that is otherwise exceptionally attentive.

Every chapter in *A View from the Bottom* offers a discrete media analysis, but not every chapter attends to its medium as attentively as the next. Chapters 1, 4, and the Conclusion argue thorough an emphasis on medium specificity, but Chapters 2 and 3, by nature of the close readings of individual films, strain to develop broader insights into cinematic discourses and media forms. This fluctuation might be understood as part of the book's project, though. In his introduction, Nguyen notes, "the chapters of the book do not follow a chronological timeline in which feminizing bottom positioning is surmounted by masculine topness. Instead, they proceed on a messier, nonlinear course, one that is deliberately itinerant and meandering, thus refusing any neat and tidy evolutionary development from oppression to liberation, from marginalization to assimilation" (25). This position defends itself as low theory, deemed so for its eccentricity and emphasis on "low" cultural objects.¹⁰ Such a designation also suggests

like a woman" as presenting a kind of powerlessness and masochism altogether different from what women experience (12-13). Whether this interpretation compellingly argues Bersani remasculinizes the bottom is unclear.

¹⁰ Nguyen places his book in the company of Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (7).

affinities bind the figure of the top to high theory and the bottom to low theory in an illustration of the sexual valences of methodology and critique. The lasting intervention of *A View from the Bottom*, though, will be its illumination of the complexity of intersectional analysis and the revivification of thinking on race and gender alongside the category of sexuality without subsuming either thereunder. For that, Nguyen has expanded the kinds of conversations we can now have. *A View From the Bottom* offers us a new position from which to critique the ideologies of top/bottom and subject/object in sexual representation.

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