

INTRODUCTION

In July 2011, a blog called *Douchebags of Grindr* exploded onto the blogosphere. Claiming to satisfy “all your douchebag needs from the profiles of Grindr,” the site gathers screen caps of Grindr profiles that readers and the blogger deem to be “douchebags” based on discrimination by body type, gender presentation, age, sexual self-identification, and other exclusionary caveats. For readers not familiar with it, Grindr is a smartphone app designed to help gay men facilitate sexual hookups. Grindr’s innovation over web-based cruising sites lies in its GPS technology, which allows users to detect the distance of other users, down to the number of feet, from their own physical location.¹ In response to the hyperbolized demands and preferences posted on Grindr and other sex cruising websites, journalist Alex Rowson opines, “You visit a hookup or dating website, cruise somebody’s profile and are confronted with the list: no fats; no femmes; no Asians; no blacks; masc only; my age or younger; str8-acting, you be too; non-scene; and on and on.” He cheekily continues, “What we find is a lot of hate when all we want is head.”²

Among rejections based on numerous physical characteristics, the most common, and hysterical, rejection on Grindr is directed toward Asian men. Here are a few excerpts from profiles posted on Douchebags of Grindr: “Asians need not apply”; “I block more Asians than the Great Wall of China!!!”; “And Asians, please leave me alone”; and “I’m scared about getting old and having to date a young Asian ladyboy.” While these excerpts are culled from profiles of white users, these sorts of Asian exclusion are not restricted to them alone: “Into only GWM. Im not replying to asians” and “Let’s chat, not into asians . . . into white guys.” Posted by Asian users, these latter examples suggest that some Asian men themselves do not find other Asians to be desirable sexual partners. In a gay sexual marketplace that valorizes fantasies of “masc,” “str8-acting,” “DL,” “bi,” “married,” “muscle,” and “hung”³—that is, attributes of masculinity—Asian men appear to occupy the most unsexy, undesirable position of all, seen as soft, effeminate, and poorly endowed. I begin with these Grindr profiles because they crystallize the “problem” of Asian masculinity, queer and straight, in the American national imagination as well as in other parts of the West.

A View from the Bottom offers a new framework for oppositional politics through a reassessment of male effeminacy and its racialization. It challenges the strategy of remasculinization employed by Asian American and gay male critics as a defense against feminization and rewrites male effeminacy as socially and sexually enabling. I develop a concept of “bottomhood” that complicates the links between the bottom position and Oriental passivity. I deploy bottomhood as a tactic that undermines normative sexual, gender, and racial standards. The book conceives of bottomhood capaciously, as a sexual position, a social alliance, an affective bond, and an aesthetic form. Posed as a sexual practice and a worldview, this flexible formulation of bottomhood articulates a novel model for coalition politics by affirming an ethical mode of relationality. Instead of shoring up our sovereignty by conflating agency with mastery, adopting a view from the bottom reveals an inescapable exposure, vulnerability, and receptiveness in our reaching out to other people.

My book makes a crucial intervention into the fields of Asian American studies, queer studies, and film studies by turning to a queer Asian moving-image archive that has hitherto been deemed too peripheral to warrant serious academic inquiry. This bottom archive is composed of a transnational body of films and videos from 1967 to the present, drawn from a range of genres, including commercial American gay porn videos, a forgotten Hollywood movie, a French narrative film often dismissed as soft-core porn, and

gay political documentaries drawn from the Asian diaspora (Canada, United States, and Australia). Across these texts, I demonstrate the ways that anal erotics and bottom positioning refract the meanings of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality in American culture, and in so doing, simultaneously enable and constrain Asian American men in visual representation. Adopting bottomhood not as a fixed role, an identity, or a physical act, but as a position—sexual, social, affective, political, aesthetic—facilitates a more expansive horizon for forging political alliances. Far from unequivocal condemnation or celebration, bottomhood is variously contested, repudiated, negotiated, and affirmed across these texts, in ways that force us to reconsider conventional understandings of desire, identity, pleasure, and politics. As such, bottomhood provides a framework for critique that can be mobilized for minoritarian political projects beyond the scope of Asian American and queer studies and politics.

Revising Asian American Masculinity

Sexuality constitutes an important and strategic arena in which to explore the intimate linkages between Asian American masculinity and discourses of power. In the past three decades, an impressive body of feminist and queer scholarship on Asian American sexuality has been steadily growing. However, little work has been done on sexuality in its vernacular meaning, that is, as sexual practice. In what follows, I bring together the two senses of sexuality—sex acts and sexual discourses—by reading a specific sexual positioning through the wider lenses of race, gender, sexuality, and visibility. A direct look at sex acts, rather than masking political operations, offers us a more nuanced understanding of the work of racial-gender formations. Discussion of explicit sexual representation remains euphemistic in everyday spaces and underresearched in academic domains. Yet pornography and other sexually explicit material are instrumental in shaping how we think about what is normal, natural, and possible in regard to sex, sexuality, and gender. Furthermore, ideas about sex, sexuality, and gender are always overlaid by common-sense understandings of race and ethnicity. *A View from the Bottom* contributes an analysis of the coconstitution of race and sexuality by exploring the multifaceted treatment of Asian American masculinity in critical scholarship and popular visual culture, with the goal of reconfiguring Asian American subjectivity and its relationship with bottomhood.

A failure to take Asian American masculinity and explicit sexual representation seriously can be attributed to the deep anxieties surrounding Asian

American masculinity, which has been historically marked by feminization and emasculation.⁴ For example, Yen Le Espiritu has detailed the ways in which the racial construction of Asian American manhood has taken two divergent routes: on the one hand, the U.S. nativist movement at the turn of the twentieth century propagated the view of Asian men as lascivious sex fiends threatening white womanhood; on the other, a series of exclusion and antimiscegenation laws instituted forced “bachelor societies,” which resulted in the view of Asian men as desexualized because they were prevented from forming heterosexual monogamous partnerships. As Espiritu elaborates, “Materially and culturally, Asian American men and women have been cast as *both men and women* and as *neither men nor women*. On the one hand, as part of the Yellow Peril that needs to be contained, Asian men and women have been represented as a *masculine* threat of military and sexual dominance and moral degeneracy. On the other hand, both sexes have been skewed toward the feminine side—a manifestation of the group’s marginalization and its role as the passive ‘model minority’ in contemporary U.S. cultural lore” (2008, 113, emphasis in original).

Espiritu’s keen observations build upon the Asian American cultural nationalist analysis of white racism. Frank Chin and his male coeditors’ landmark literary anthology *Aiiieeee!* (1975) signaled a powerful challenge to the white male literary canon and created a new voice and visibility for Asian American writers. However, their antiracist and anti-imperialist project was accomplished via the installation of a very narrow conception of Asian American identity, one organized around a vision of the ideal, authentic Asian American subject characterized as male, heterosexual, American born, and English speaking. As Daniel Y. Kim points out, Chin and his colleagues compared the threatening traits attributed to other men of color (“the evil black stud, Indian rapist, Mexican macho”; Kim 2005, 137) with those docile traits ascribed to Asian men, who, as objects of “racist love,” are seen as “womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, [and] creativity” (cited in Kim 2005, 68).

Feminist scholars such as Elaine Kim, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, and King-Kok Cheung have argued that Chin and his cohorts’ gesture of remasculinization simply reinforces white male patriarchal hegemony with their bid for an Asian American martial masculinity.⁵ These feminist scholars point out that remasculinization is of limited efficacy because it recuperates Asian American masculinity by subscribing to a misogynist and homophobic agenda.

As Jachinson Chan contends, for some straight Asian American men, “the desire for inclusion within the dominant model of masculinity overrides the politics of alliance with other oppressed groups.” Yet, Chan also notes, to reconstruct an “alternative” Asian American model of masculinity that is “non-patriarchal, anti-sexist, and anti-racist,” heterosexual Asian American men “risk the stigmatization of being effeminized and homosexualized” (2001, 11). But, instead of seeing the associations with women and queers as stigmatizing, I suggest it is more socially and politically advantageous to advocate such an alliance as an important strategy of dismantling racism alongside heteronormativity.

To cite a concrete example that has closer relevance to my focus on sexual representation, I refer to Asian American studies scholar Darrell Y. Hamamoto’s porn video project, *Skin on Skin* (2004). Hamamoto enthusiastically promoted this work as the first porn video featuring a straight Asian American man fucking an Asian American woman. This attempt to “capture the pleasures of the flesh as enjoyed by Yellow people” (Hamamoto 2000, 81) is enacted here by inserting an Asian American man in the place traditionally occupied by a white man in heterosexual pornographic scenarios. However, in this substitution of one representative of male phallic potency (bad, objectifying white man) with another (good, sexy Asian man), it remains entirely unclear how this intraracial sex tape has transformed the “pleasures of the flesh” of the other constituents of “Yellow people,” especially Asian American women, not to mention Asian American lesbians and gay men.

One witnesses this marginalization of queer sexualities in *Masters of the Pillow* (dir. James Hou, 2004), a documentary that chronicles the making of *Skin on Skin*. In a telling sequence, Rick Lee, owner of and sexual performer on the adult website Asian Man: The Sex Adventures of Asian Man, lectures on the participation of Asian Americans in the American pornography industry in Hamamoto’s Asian American studies class at the University of California, Davis. To a crowded room of rapt Asian American students, Lee states that in the adult film industry, one encounters Asian women “getting screwed by everybody and their cousins. But an Asian guy, a straight Asian guy in the industry, [is] basically impossible to find.” However, as he speaks, the camera cuts away to footage of Lee’s own website featuring images of Lee fucking different white women in a variety of positions. This visual insert counters his oral testimony while attesting to Lee’s pornographic performances as an exceptional intervention in the mainstream American adult film industry.⁶ He goes on to say that if one does find an Asian man in porn,

“he’s basically gay, and he’s a bottom.” In response, the entire class bursts out in hysterical laughter. Lee’s narration and the students’ reaction effectively pose gay Asian American bottomhood as the butt of the joke, that is, as the typical, sorry state of affairs that requires scholarly and activist renovation.

In Hamamoto’s and Lee’s corrective efforts to promote straight Asian American men as potent pornographic studs, they leave dominant constructions of heteromascularity intact by simply expounding a business-as-usual pornographic program, one that must dismiss gay Asian American male sexuality in order to shore up their status as proper desiring sexual subjects, as real men. Showing that straight Asian American men can and do fuck, too, merely points to the limits of an inclusionary politics based on the remasculinization of heterosexual Asian American men, achieved at the expense of other Asian American subjects. These assimilationist moves call for a strong, forceful queer Asian American critique. In the words of David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, a queer Asian American critique “demands more than a deviant swerving from the narrow confines of normativity and normative heterosexuality; it demands subjecting the notion of Asian American identity itself to vigorous interrogation” (1998, 9). Heeding Eng and Hom’s call, I advance bottomhood as a critical strategy that allows us to reflect on other meanings feminization and emasculation articulate besides being the effects of white racism on Asian American manhood. This consideration requires us to draw on the insights a long history of gay male critique can provide, a history that has sought to recuperate and redress the bottom position and its lowly and debased social ranking.

Gay Male Critique and the “Desiring Use of the Anus”

In the Western popular imagination, male homosexuality is often conflated with the perversion of sodomy; gay male sex is reduced to anal sex. The term “bottom,” in gay male culture, designates the receptive partner in anal sex, the person lying on the bottom underneath the top, the insertive partner. The “lower” positioning of bottom is reinforced by the additional meanings of bottom to refer to the buttocks or anus. Assuming the bottom position, or, in sexual vernacular, “getting fucked,” has acquired a host of negative associations, including being weak or humiliated. For a man to get anally penetrated by another man signals the ultimate act of emasculation. In a patriarchal society, to bottom is akin to being penetrated and dominated like a woman. It is to be lacking in power or to surrender one’s power to the top. The top position is seen as being “active,” “dominant,” and “masculine,” while

the bottom role consigns one to the less privileged side of the binary: “passive,” “submissive,” and “feminine.”⁷ Top-bottom roles are not restricted to gay male sexual practice, but can also be found in s/m play (somasochism, both straight and gay) as well as lesbian sexual cultures.

Although dominant perceptions of top-bottom roles understand the top as dominant and active and the bottom as submissive and passive, the power dynamics between the two positions are much more multifaceted, as the appellation “butch bottom” attests. I will have more to say about these complications below. Here, I want to clarify that I am simply registering the dominant meanings of top-bottom, rather than endorsing these troubling dichotomies. The binary construction of top-bottom is creatively interrogated in gay male communities, in ways that question and reinscribe norms of sexual and gender expressions. In this section, my archive alternates between “high” gay male theory and “low” gay male cultural productions to activate a dialogue between the academic and the popular. Because it is within these two arenas that we find the most sustained and productive engagements with gay male anal eroticism, I characterize the approach I take here as “low theory,” which Judith Halberstam defines as “a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory” (2011, 16, emphasis in original). Both gay male theory and cultural production are eccentric in their explorations of a topic considered impolite, illegitimate, or, in Interweb-speak, NSFW (not safe for work). Throughout this book, my readings of texts about bottomhood are consistently guided by a mode of reading that is informed by theories and practices deemed lowly, backward, and out of date.

Gay male critics such as Guy Hocquenghem, Leo Bersani, D. A. Miller, and Lee Edelman have challenged the assessments of bottomhood as feminizing and emasculating by revalorizing the derided anus. The traits of passivity, receptivity, and femininity ascribed to gay male anal eroticism, they maintain, can be harnessed for a radical undermining of aggressive, hard, impenetrable phallic masculinity. From Hocquenghem’s ([1972] 1993) polemical *Homosexual Desire*, published at the height of the sexual revolution and gay liberation movements in France, to Bersani’s landmark essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987) written as a response to U.S. right-wing scapegoating of gay men during the first years of the AIDS pandemic, these writers’ work employed anal eroticism as a central part of their critique of civil society. Writing on the “desiring use of the anus,” Hocquenghem argues that desubli-

mation of anal sexuality wreaks havoc on a symbolic order based on Oedipal reproduction and phallic sociality. In a similar vein, Bersani (1995, 101) advocates gay male passive anal sexuality—which he couches in psychoanalytic terms as “self-shattering” *jouissance*—as a way of undoing phallogocentrism and rejecting the assimilationist domestication of homosexuality.⁸ He famously declared that, for heteronormative culture, passive gay anal sex engenders the “seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (Bersani, 1987, 212).⁹ Since power and the constitution of the self are invariably linked, the value of ecstatic bottomhood lies in its embrace of a “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (217). Bersani offers tremendous insight about the attraction of bottomhood for gay men when he writes: “From within their nearly mad identification with it [heterosexual male identity], they never cease to feel the appeal of its being violated” (209, emphasis in original). In other words, gay men’s passionate attachment to phallic masculinity is simultaneously coupled with the immense pleasure in violating its authority (i.e., through getting fucked up the ass by another man).

Evidence of the idolization of phallic masculinity, combined with its simultaneous defilement in receptive anal sex, can be found in gay male popular culture. Consider the following description from the classic American gay sex manual *The Joy of Gay Sex* under the entry “Bottom”: “Some bottoms are particularly turned on by large cocks, actually, huge donkey dong, not only large, but really thick. . . . This prize is the visual ambrosia of some bottoms. A cock’s length is rarely a problem; its thickness may be. If an exceedingly thick cock fucks a bottom hard, the two sphincter muscles may get torn. Still, we know of men who have been damaged this way and, after recuperating, go back for more. We recognize the excitement of being plowed hard by a huge symbol of masculine authority” (Silverstein and Picano 2003, 23–24).¹⁰ Along with the favoring of thickness over length, note the highlighting of the “visual ambrosia” of a cock’s girth. The pleasure-pain of penetration is intensified by the visual prize of the top’s “huge donkey dong.” The insistence on the joy in being penetrated—not just being “plowed” but, more significantly, “damaged”—suggests the overwhelming appeal of submission and masochism in the bottom position. However, in contrast to contemporary queer theory’s emphasis on the fluidity of gender performances and sexual desires, the positionings of top and bottom in contemporary American gay male cultures are more often constituted as social roles or identities. A perennial complaint in gay male communities about the disproportionate

bottom to top ratio and the difficulty of finding “real tops” demonstrates the profound esteem of top masculinity in gay contexts. At the same time, the sentiment also reveals the immense attractiveness of bottoming, as an identification revealed to one’s confidants rather than as an identity to proclaim or embrace publicly.

A key point in these gay male texts, of both the theoretical and self-help varieties, is the connections they establish between the physical experience of bottoming and the ideological perspective linked to that experience, or, to cite *The Joy of Gay Sex*, the continuities between “being plowed hard by a huge symbol of masculine authority” and “a state of mind, a feeling that one has about oneself in relationship to other men” (Silverstein and Picano 2003, 23). In popular gay male sexuality self-help literature, the physiological dimension of bottoming is often rendered as neutral and invoked to defend and justify the sexual practice (for example, by alluding to nerve endings, the prostate, and so on).¹¹ It is the ideational dimension of bottoming that generates the most intense cultural anxieties around gay male anal eroticism. At various times in the following pages, I use descriptions of the physical sensations of bottoming to affirm some of the ideological meanings assigned to anal eroticism, for example, feelings of exposure and defenselessness. At other times, I complicate cultural assumptions, for example, the idea that bottoming is necessarily passive and feminizing. Further, there are instances where the bodily and the psychic overlap in ways that cannot be thought apart from one another. Throughout, I take up the correlations, and discontinuities, between the sexual and the social in my conceptualization of bottomhood as a position that mediates between racial-sexual identities and acts.

The paradox concerning the popularity and disavowal of bottomhood necessitates a reconsideration of the treatment of femininity in gay male discourses. It is not unreasonable to assume that in gay/lesbian and queer studies one would find complex, and affirmative, analyses of diverse models of gender dissidence and their conjunctions with nonnormative sexualities. As sexual minorities stigmatized for being “failed” men, gay men would seem to be in the ideal position to question oppressive norms of gender and sexuality. However, in spite of assertions by some critics that the gay resignification of dominant masculinity operates to subvert and undermine its power, it should be noted that gay men’s eroticization of dominant masculinity also constitutes a pseudoreligious devotion to such masculinity.¹² A cursory look at a key gay male popular culture form such as pornography, with its cele-

bration of white, muscular, and hung male prototypes, lends strong support to Richard Dyer's observation that gay pornography, like its heterosexual counterpart, privileges the experience of the top.¹³ Indeed, mainstream gay porn's visual logic consistently insists on larger-than-life penises, and its sexual numbers invariably conclude with performers—both tops and bottoms—jacking off to ejaculation. That is, pleasure, even for the bottom, is signified as the pleasure of the cock.¹⁴

At the same time, the genre accords an inordinate amount of attention to the bottom. The central sex act and narrative event that sets gay porn apart from straight porn is the penetration of one man's cock into another man's asshole. As Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo remind us, the "narrative wager" unique to gay porn concerns "a supplemental question about what will happen when there are two bodies with two penises. Who will, and/or who won't get penetrated?" (2004a, 162). Thus, I want to qualify Dyer's assertion about gay porn's romance with the top by suggesting that while porn conventions encourage viewer identification with the top (via the cum shot, for example), they simultaneously stage the fantasy scenario from the bottom's point of view. For instance, the sex acts in a typical scene progress from making out to fellatio to rimming to anal intercourse and ending with cum shots on the bottom's buttocks, back, chest, face, and/or mouth. Because the taboo, and erotic charge, of gay porn lies in a man getting fucked in the ass by another man, the narrative commonly directs its focus on the bottom performer. This privileging of the bottom's experience is reinforced by such visual-aural depictions as extremely low-angle close-ups of cock entering asshole; the sheer variety of fucking positions (missionary, doggie style, sitting on it, side to side, and so on) framed in numerous camera setups; moans, groans, dirty talk, and other verbal eruptions from the bottom; the duration of the ass fucking signaling the endurance of the bottom; and the look of satisfaction on the bottom's face after the top has shot his load (and the bottom following suit with his own cum shot). All of these elements tally up to a hot bottom performance.¹⁵ Even when a scene includes many tops and one bottom, as in a gang bang, the fantasy is often organized around the viewer's identification with the bottom receiving the ass poundings. More accurately, these porn scenarios invite viewers to identify with the bottom as much as, if not more than, the top. What's more, the thrill is doubled when the bottom happens to be big, tall, muscular, and big dicked. Contemporary gay porn, like the mainstream American gay male community at large, remains enamored with its butch tops and butcher bottoms.¹⁶ But the very

constructions of top and bottom constitute a historically specific and shifting phenomenon. I now consider how these sexual positions were reconfigured from the early days of gay liberation in the 1970s to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s to the present day.

The Polarization of Sexual Positions

The polarization of top and bottom sex roles and positions in contemporary gay pornography, it must be pointed out, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although historians such as David Halperin have documented the inserter-insertee sexual roles and their correlations with superior-subordinate social status as far back as ancient Greece, the terminology of bottom and top in gay male sexual communities seems to have emerged in the post-Stonewall period. The first edition of *The Joy of Gay Sex*, published in 1977, lists various entries referring to positions for anal sex: “Bottoms Up,” “Doggy Style,” “Face to Face,” and “Topping It Off”; however, there is no entry listed for bottom or top. It was not until the 1992 second edition, *The New Joy of Gay Sex*, that one finds entries for “Bottom” and “Top.” These omissions suggest that, though undoubtedly practiced as sex acts, these positions did not constitute coherent sexual identities as they do in the present day. In an analysis of gay male personal ads from the 1960s to the 1990s, Daniel Harris notes that the terms “Greek active,” “Greek passive,” “French active,” and “French passive”—or, in code of personal ads, “Gr/a,” “Gr/p,” “Fr/a,” and “Fr/p”¹⁷—were used in the 1970s to describe gay male sexual preferences. According to Harris, these expressions “allowed gay men to liberate themselves from the stigma of effeminacy by redefining their passivity as a specific set of acts that occurred in a specific location—namely, during sex—rather than as a general style of flaming behavior that they were forced to adopt in public” (Harris 1997, 56). In other words, “Greek passive” signifies an act that a gay man enjoys engaging in in the bedroom, or the park, as the case may be; such a preference is not advertised through his effeminate bodily comportment. The emergence of “top” and “bottom” in the late 1980s, argues Harris, constitutes an even stronger delinking of sex acts from gender presentation (or more to the point, of getting fucked from effeminacy); that is, “bottom” as a position distances itself from the feminizing act of getting fucked. What the changes in gay personal ads and the different editions of *The Joy of Gay Sex* register, then, is the quite recent genealogy of “bottom.” “Bottom” as a legible subject position seems to have emerged between the heady days of gay liberation and the height of the AIDS crisis. The absence of “bottom” and

“top” in the 1970s can be attributed to the egalitarian tenets of gay liberation, one that deemed top and bottom as outdated heterosexist sex roles. To wit, in “Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto” (first published in 1970), Carl Wittman rejects topping and bottoming as a “mimicry of straights”: “This is role playing at its worst; we must transcend these roles—we strive for democratic, mutual, reciprocal sex” ([1970] 1992, 306).¹⁸

The shift from role fluidity to a polarization of top and bottom positions can be traced in gay male popular culture from the 1970s to the 1990s. In his historical study of gay male pornography, Jeffrey Escoffier identifies a casual interchangeability of top and bottom roles in porn from the 1970s. According to Escoffier, rigid top-bottom positions emerged in the early 1990s due to the AIDS epidemic and the discovery of the greater risk of contracting HIV for the bottom partner. An idolization of the top role resulted in a “new kind of gay porn star” as embodied by Jeff Stryker, a straight-identified performer whose sexual repertoire includes fucking and getting sucked, with no reciprocity (Escoffier 2009, 215).¹⁹ In a similar vein, it was not until the third edition of *The New Joy of Gay Sex*, published in 2003, that one finds an entry for “Versatility.”²⁰ Rather than indicating a return to a prior polymorphous 1970s sexual free-for-all, the category of “versatility” demonstrates that top-bottom positionings have become institutionalized in gay male communities. That is, versatility allows for the switching and assumption of multiple positions, but not the transcendence of them.²¹

In the past twenty years, bottoming has also taken on a remasculinizing cast in both the American gay porn industry and in gay male theory. Returning to Bersani, we might say that the gay male bottom’s “feminine” abdication of power provides a new kind of agency. Indeed, in separating sexual roles from gender performance, gay male critics have sought to retain male privilege while championing a subversive femininity: ecstatic bottomhood is maintained alongside a continuing investment in phallic masculinity. That is, the joyful abdication of power only makes sense in the context of those with something to give up. Indeed, the idea of agency, or the capacity to make choices and act in one’s own interests, is already socially structured by existing relations of power. In her critique of Bersani’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Mandy Merck observes that “in his comparisons of heterosexual women and homosexual men, Bersani seems at times to be describing two different ‘femininities.’ A cursory reading of his rendition of rectal sex reveals a heroic rhetoric of ‘demolition,’ ‘danger,’ and ‘sacrifice’ . . . that is nowhere attributed to vaginal penetration. Might it be Bersani’s view that male

'femininity' is butcher than its female equivalent, precisely because the subject's masculinity is at stake?" (2000, 157). Similarly, as Tania Modleski reminds us, "It is clear that powerlessness and masochism have different ideological valences for women than for gay men" (1991, 149). These two feminist scholars' arguments expose the masculinist basis of Bersani's thesis, which rests on a surrendering of a male privilege that women do not possess.²²

The masculinist bias found in gay male discussions of bottomhood such as Bersani's also is evident in some contemporary gay male sexual cultures. Take, for example, barebackers, those who specifically identify with a community of others in which condomless gay anal sex constitutes a transgressive act against mainstream norms (gay and straight) of sexual responsibility.²³ In bareback sexual discourses circulating online, the testimonies heralding the ecstasy of getting fucked without condoms reveal that these practices—far from attesting to an embrace of powerlessness, feminization, and self-shattering—function as hard proof of a masculinity powerful enough to endure endless ass poundings and the reception of "buckets of cum." Clearly, this "outlaw" brand of gay male bottomhood indicates not the disruption of masculine norms, but rather, an enthusiastic affirmation of those norms.

In his book *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean observes that "although not factored by class in any conventional sense, bareback subculture prizes an ethos of hypermasculinity and erotic transgressiveness that tends to be imagined in terms of working-class masculinity, with its military paraphernalia, skin head haircuts, tattoos, and muscular physiques designed to suggest a life of manual labor. What's necessary to perfect this image is often the kind of leisure and material resources enjoyed by more-affluent classes" (2009, 38–39). The "erotic transgressiveness" to which Dean refers concerns barebackers' decision to engage in unsafe sex, to share or risk contracting HIV. Dean's description of bareback subculture's gendered ethos reflects a sexual radicalism propped up on a hypermasculinity that is explicitly classed and racialized. Not surprisingly, the militaristic, muscled, tattooed, skinhead barebacker can easily be taken as a 2000s update of the 1970s gay macho clone. However, whereas the roles of bottom and top in the early decade of gay liberation were not explicitly connected to gender presentation, the assertions of sexual prowess in bareback discourses reek of a compensatory masculine appeal, especially for those occupying the bottom role. As Dean further explains, "Although the sexual bottom regularly is addressed by his tops in the most derogatory feminine terms (such as 'bitch,' 'pussy,' and 'cunt'), this misogynist rhetoric does not seem to impugn his mascu-

linity. . . . No matter how one interprets such language, in bareback subculture being sexually penetrated is a matter of ‘taking it like a man,’ enduring without complaint any discomfort or temporary loss of status, in order to prove one’s masculinity” (2009, 51). On the one hand, to assert that to be penetrated anally makes one “more of a man” goes against the homophobic perception that sees it as a demeaning, emasculating act. On the other, what is troubling with this move is the promotion of a very confining model of gay male subjecthood: the heroization of the gay male bottom position is achieved through the collusion with misogynist heteromascularity (as in the barebacking vocabulary quoted by Dean) and the marginalization of male effeminacy and femininity.²⁴ Rather than equating bottoming with “taking it like a man,” a more generative line of analysis would be to reexamine the stubborn attachments between bottomhood and feminine gender presentations. Such an effort would acknowledge, and affirm, various styles of embodying and doing bottomhood, allowing for the cultivation of social and political alliances between gay men and other subjects similarly situated at the bottom of social hierarchies.

It is my contention that the antiracist rhetoric of Asian American communities and the antihomophobic rhetoric in the mainstream gay and lesbian movement both employ the strategy of remasculinization in order to legitimize themselves and gain acceptance from the dominant culture. Significantly, their methods of achieving political voice and social visibility are maintained at the cost of marginalizing femininity and feminine embodiment. By contrast, I argue for a politics of bottomhood that opposes racism and heteronormativity without scapegoating femininity. On the one hand, the realignment of gay Asian American bottomhood with feminizing abjection would appear to reinscribe dominant constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. On the other, the refusal to redeem gay Asian American bottomhood through hyperbolic masculinity points to a more expansive political program, one that rejects token assimilation into existing social structures. I propose an alternative paradigm that recognizes femininity, vulnerability, and other negatively coded aspects of the bottom position.

Hurt So Good: The Pleasures of Bottomhood

In order to challenge “commonsense” notions of bottomhood as punishment and utterly lacking in pleasure, we must complicate the commonsense linkage of topness with absolute domination and bottomhood with total humiliation. A view from the bottom recognizes a potential for mutual pleasure and

recognition between bottom and top,²⁵ as well as a rewriting of bottomhood as a mode of accessing sexual and social legibility. The appeal of the bottom position certainly involves a pleasurable surrender of power implicit in making oneself available to be surrounded and covered, mounted and penetrated, crushed and filled by a loaded symbol of male authority, the phallus. To open oneself up to the pleasure of anal penetration requires not only conscious control but also a letting go. In *Gay Men and Anal Eroticism: Tops, Bottoms, and Versatiles*, a book of personal testimonies about gay men's creative negotiations of the cultural taboos around anal sex, Steven G. Underwood describes the physical sensations of anal penetration: "The asshole is loaded with nerve endings and is extremely sensitive to erotic stimulation. The initial moment of penetration when the cock head breaks through the sphincter; the rubbing of the penis against the bottom's prostate during the actual fucking; the contraction of the rectum around the penis; these are the highlights of a memorable fuck session for both partners. The internal stimulation can be so intense that some bottoms . . . are able to cum without even touching their dicks" (2003, 8).

By calling attention to the actual physical experience of anal penetration as one loaded with sensitivity, stimulation, and pleasure, Underwood contests the moralistic, disembodied view of anal sex as dirty, perverted, and unnatural. The latter phobic perspective, if it admits pleasurable anal sex at all, would simply privilege the pleasure of the top and his penis; it cannot account for the pleasure of the bottom and his asshole (which is assigned a proper one-way, exit-only bodily function). Underwood's account of anal penetration, from the receiving end, effectively affirms the rich experience involving nerve endings and contractions, tension and release. Though his description of the embodied practice of bottoming constitutes an important corrective to familiar dismissals of bottoming as abject punishment, Underwood's interpretation is a common strategy used by bottom enthusiasts to explain bottoming: that is, it is justifiable because it is a physically enjoyable act.

However, this explanation of physiological satisfaction, while insightful, should also be read as a defensive tactic for coming to terms with the deep cultural anxieties associated with anal penetration. Even as both partners experience pleasures to various degrees, the social meanings assigned to each role differ significantly. While the pleasure of the top derives from the normative male prerogative of fucking, of performing as a masculine subject who penetrates another's hole to get himself off, the pleasure of the bottom

signifies a fall from masculinity, a “feminine” pleasure in being fucked. By surrendering his asshole to be penetrated, the grown man accesses the forbidden pleasure of “being a woman” (or his fantasy of being one), and in the process forfeits his claims to masculine subjecthood. It is precisely this fall from masculinity attached to the pleasure of bottomhood that underwrites straight male anxieties about dropping the soap in the locker room shower. And yet what this splitting of top and bottom pleasures obscures is the proximity of a man’s ass and his cock. For instance, Underwood’s careful description of a “memorable fuck session for both partners” stresses the proximity of anus and penis. Due to this nearness, the internal stimulation of anus by cock has been described as being masturbated and massaged from the inside. The connectedness and blurring of anal and penile sensations obfuscate any strict division between top/bottom and cock/ass. For it is the case that penile orgasms also involve anal contractions, which are “most noticeable when the anus is contracting *against* something (finger, penis, etc.)” (Morin 1986, 99, emphasis in original); anal orgasms, as a result of prostate stimulation, can also produce ejaculations without penile contact. Further, some commentators multiply the meanings of anal orgasms by proposing that such orgasms involve both psychic and physiological release. What these orgasms have in common is not only the bottom’s pleasure in being penetrated, but also a pleasure that is “relationally dependent” on the top’s pleasure in fucking (Hoppe 2011, 203–204).

If we put the top back into the picture, it is more apparent that “passive” anal sex entails an ongoing negotiation of power between bottom and top, with neither position deemed *a priori*, outside of specific positions and scenarios, as exercising complete power and control. The following testimonies attest to the varying control a bottom takes and gives up:

It’s obviously passive because you’re allowing someone to enter you, but then there’s also controlling of the rhythm and controlling how deep it goes. In that sense, there’s control in being receptive. (Underwood 2003, 51)

He waits a moment or two . . . then moves his ass back onto my cock in one mouthful, dilating and clamping without a struggle. . . . He’s undulating back and forth, sort of fucking himself with my body, so you could say he turns into an ass, an active one, turning me into a dildo. . . . His butt is a point of connection if not union—we *coexist* around the length of a few inches of skin. (Glück 2004, 5, emphasis in original)²⁶

In these descriptions, the asshole is assigned an active function by physically regulating the rhythm and depth of penetration. So, while on a psychological level the bottom's role is to emotionally please and satisfy the top, the manner in which he goes about it reveals a certain degree of control, coming from a "top" headspace. In the second excerpt, the overwhelming stimulation of being penetrated reduces the receptive partner's entire body to his anal cavity. This anus voraciously swallows, dilates, and clamps, thus effectively turning the top's cock into a mere sex toy. These testimonies of bottoming consistently forge a link between the physical sensations of getting fucked with the broader psychological ramifications those sensations signify, specifically, the relative power and control of the bottom. Seen in this light, the claim that bottomhood is far from absolute passivity and powerlessness is not surprising, as the many adjectives denoting the different types of bottoms further prove: pushy, power, bossy, butch, hungry, verbal, aggressive, insatiable, and greedy.²⁷

At the same time, gay male bottoms must also grapple with, if not overcome, the cultural taboos concerning bodily penetration and orifices connected to waste and pollution. Allowing another man access to one's anus constitutes the most intimate of sexual acts, rendering the bottom vulnerable physically and emotionally. Bottom enthusiasts in gay male and s/m communities designate this dynamic as receptivity, chosen in preference over the term passivity, due to the latter's connotations of "lack of involvement and loss of will" (Morin 1986, 134). Receptivity is an active engagement that accounts for the senses of vulnerability, intimacy, and shame that one necessarily risks in assuming the bottom position. Such a shift in terminology also forces a reconfiguration of physical, sexual, and social hierarchies, whereby bottomhood might be resignified from powerlessness to "active passivity," "strength in submission," and "passive agency."²⁸ Instead of regarding these different modes of openness as a loss of power, it is more profitable to regard "*the ability to relax, to receive, to voluntarily abandon control [as] a psychological and interpersonal asset, not a loss*" (Morin 1986, 133, emphasis in original). In describing top-bottom power dynamics in this way, I am not promoting a fuzzy, touchy-feely, sanitized view of gay sex. Rather, I want to foreground the interplay of power and to hold on to some sense of surrender and submission invariably tied to bottomhood.²⁹

Clearly, the fact of boundary trespass involved in being penetrated is crucial in this discussion. As Susan Kippax and Gary Smith emphasize, "the

corporeality of vaginal and anal intercourse renders the receptive person more vulnerable than the insertive partner: that having something inside your body or on top of your body can render your body more vulnerable” (2001, 428).³⁰ Indeed, I contend that this physical, and by extension psychic, vulnerability plays a pivotal role in our relationship with our own bodies and the bodies of others around us. Instead of an aggressive fortifying of our psychic and corporeal armor, a more socially and politically efficacious move would be to recognize and embrace this exposure and openness. Referring to the immense loss in the wake of AIDS, escalating global violence post-9/11, and everyday oppressions and injustices faced by women, people of color, and queers—and the lessons they provide about the limits of our sexual autonomy, Judith Butler writes, “we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publicly assertive and vulnerable” (2004, 18). It bears noting that our patriarchal society continues to characterize these forms of psychic and physical susceptibility in a feminizing and racializing manner. The stakes of action are differently constituted for women, queers, and people of color. I thus now turn to the contribution a gay Asian American perspective makes.

A Race to the Bottom

Vulnerability and powerlessness hold a vastly different political import for gay Asian American men, subjects who are expected to be especially, if not exclusively, suited for the ecstatic passive anal sex championed by Bersani and other gay male critics. In “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” a landmark essay that brings a critical race analysis to bear on gay male theory, Richard Fung (1991) argues that due to the pervasive view of Asian men as deficient in masculinity, they are cast in gay video porn as passive bottoms who function as sexual objects for the enjoyment of dominant white tops. These racialized conventions in gay porn confirm Asian American critics’ complaint that Asian men are emasculated in American culture. However, Fung carefully points out that there is nothing wrong with bottomhood or submission *per se*; the problem arises from the fact that Asian men are always consigned to this position in the videos. Extrapolating from Fung’s insights, David Eng enlists the tools of psychoanalysis to argue that the conflation of Asian and anus in the popular imagination enacts a “reverse fetishism,” signaling the white male subject’s “refusal to see on the body of an Asian male the penis that is clearly there for him to see” (2001,

2, emphasis in original). This performance of “racial castration” underscores the ways in which the psychic traumas of sexual and racial difference powerfully constitute each other. Furthermore, Eng clarifies that queerness and deviant sexual formations already pervade conventional Asian American historiography, in such phenomena as bachelor societies, female prostitution, and paper sons; such a queer archive, then, might be mobilized to critique normative values such as heterosexual reproduction, the nuclear family unit, and traditional community ties.

These two critics’ keen analyses alert us to the need for historicizing the claim of “humiliation of the self” put forth by Bersani. Humiliation and shame play a decisive role in the formation of Asian American male subjects. These constitutive effects of Asian American male subjectivity cannot simply be superseded by an embrace of suicidal anal sexuality as a way to negate phallic masculinity. For those already relegated to the lowest rung of the sexual and social ladder, an unqualified embrace of powerlessness only leads to an amplification of their subjugation and lowly position. What other routes are possible for thinking about gay Asian American bottomhood that would afford pleasure and agency (and, at times, a thrilling surrender of power and agency)? If we remain wholly within the terms of Fung’s thesis, we would discover that to replace Asian-as-anus with Asian-as-penis is to reinscribe the penis and topness, that is, dominant masculinity, as the desirable end point. By contrast, my deployment of gay bottomhood exploits the deviancy attached to Asian American masculinity in order to affirm and celebrate an altogether different paradigm of gendered, racial, and sexual subjectivity, one that refuses to restore to feminized Asian American male subjects the refuge of heteronormativity. Identifying with bottomhood becomes a matter of disidentification with it, whereby the gay Asian American male subject “neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999, 11). We find a disidentificatory process at work in Joon Oluchi Lee’s articulation of Asian American male castration as a state of joy. The “castrated [Asian American] boy” delights in being “mistaken for something” the world deems abject (2005, 54). Lee writes, “Embracing racial castration can be a potentially liberatory willingness to embrace femininity as a race and, vice versa, race as femininity” (2005, 44). Affirming bottomhood, femininity, and race together rewrites abject masculinity without writing off femininity and the feminine, thus enabling a new mode of social recognition. Importantly, as Lee (2005, 46) further points out, while being aware of the

“risk [of] psychic and bodily danger” in affiliating with femininity, a gay male performance of femininity must take care not to respond to that threat of danger with a recourse to masculinist self-preservation.

In addition to these developments in queer Asian American studies, this study has also profited from exciting queer of color critique scholarship that calls attention to the deep imbrications between race and bottomhood in other contexts, as can be seen in Kathryn Bond Stockton’s (2006) exploration of the “switchpoint” between “black” and “queer” in *Beautiful Bottom*, *Beautiful Shame*, and Darieck Scott’s (2010) examination of the generative force of black abjection in *Extravagant Abjection*. As Scott pointedly queries, “If we are racialized . . . through domination and abjection and humiliation, is there anything of value to be learned from the experience of being defeated, humiliated, abjected?” (2010, 6). Following these two writers’ penetrating inquiries into the power-pleasure and attractions of black bottomhood, I attend to the specific experiences of gay Asian men, subjects who are obstinately positioned as social and sexual bottoms in the popular American imagination.³¹ I am in full accord with Stockton’s and Scott’s exquisite analyses, especially their differing commentaries about the political utility of bottomhood.

Throughout this introduction, I have been hesitant about making definitive, totalizing claims about gay Asian American bottomhood as subversive, resistant, agential, and empowering. In this effort, I have benefited from Heather Love’s caution about queer criticism’s compulsion to rescue the “bad gay past” by “transforming the base materials of social abjection into the gold of political agency” (2007, 27, 18).³² Following Love’s observation that social abjection need not be proven to be politically advantageous in order to warrant critical attention, I maintain that we do not always have to attribute resistance and subversion to gay Asian American bottomhood in order to justify its existence and accord it serious analysis. In certain circumstances, bottoming entails the gleeful surrendering of power; its pleasures do not always depend on resistance and subversion. Even if we ascribe a transgressiveness to bottomhood, as many gay male critics rightly do, part of this transgressiveness involves the very relinquishment of power. Having said that, I do want to insist on the point that the racialization of the bottom position demands an acknowledgment of gay Asian American bottomhood’s complicated relationship to questions of power and pleasure. To be sure, I agree with Scott when he glosses blackness-in-abjection by specifying: “The power or ability I examine . . . has to do with *the creation and use of pleasure*:

by this I mean the transformation of the elements of humiliation and pain . . . that, though abject, is politically salient, potentially politically effective or powerful” (2010, 163–164, emphasis in original). The transformation of “domination and abjection and humiliation” into pleasure by racialized subjects does reveal a degree of power. To reconfigure an imposition of the bottom role into a politics of gay Asian American bottomhood constitutes what Scott calls “a form of counterintuitive power” (2010, 9, emphasis in original). A consideration of this “counterintuitive power” forces a recognition that the assertion of agency in much of cultural theory often comes with a normativizing bent. For instance, Lauren Berlant has recommended that “we need to think about agency and personhood not only in normative terms but also as activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality” (2007, 758). The resistance against agency couched in nonnormative, noncoercive terms comes closer to a mode of agency that Anne Cheng describes as “a convoluted, ongoing, generative, and at times contradicting negotiation with pain” (2001, 15).

Bottomhood is neither crushingly powerless nor all-powerful. Ultimately, I am less concerned in locating instances of resistance than in analyzing the various meanings that accrue to bottomhood in specific texts and contexts.³³ To refuse to redeem bottomhood as resistance does not mean the denial of all political effects. By dedicating serious attention to the vicissitudes of bottomhood in the following pages, I demonstrate my firm belief in the important political stakes therein. Persistently branded as sexual and social bottoms, Asian American men are in an advantageous position from which to use the threatening force of bottom-as-abjection to confront the management of Asian American masculinity. Though the book focuses on gay Asian American men, its optic of bottomhood sheds light on Asian American masculinity in general, as queerness informs all formations of Asian American male subjectivity.

A View from the Bottom

In taking Asian American masculinity and sexual representation as its focus, *A View from the Bottom* concentrates on a queer Asian American sexual archive that has been marginal to both queer studies and Asian American studies. This oversight can be attributed to the fact that the films and videos I examine are dismissed as too stereotypical, damaging, and offensive for serious academic study.³⁴ Asian American scholarship on sexuality and gen-

der has generally favored the written text (literature, historical documents) over domains such as the visual arts or cinema. Elaine Kim suggests that a major reason for the underdevelopment of visual criticism in Asian American studies is “because visual culture and visuality, such as through the media of photography and film, have traditionally been regarded with suspicion as colonial tools of silencing and deracination” (2003, 41). The need to rectify historical silences and rewrite inaccurate accounts can be found in two prominent genres of Asian American film, the social-political documentary and the historical trauma film. These genres typically employ “the politics of *ressentiment*” to seek redress for past injury (Okada 2005, 45).³⁵ Indeed, Asian American film history is frequently plotted from a sobering documentary tradition to its pinnacle achievement, the fictional narrative feature. Accordingly, this developmental narrative traces an itinerary from social exclusion to cultural acceptance. It is precisely this aspiration to normalization through the media that a bottom archive (in both form and content) disrupts.

Historically, visual culture criticism on Asian American gender and sexuality has been concerned with evaluating representations based on a set of narrow, realist criteria. In the past two decades, however, an exciting body of feminist and queer scholarship on Asian American film and media studies has pushed visual culture debates beyond the limiting boundaries of stereotype criticism. Scholars such as Darrell Hamamoto, Karen Shimakawa, Eve Oishi, Hoday King, and Glen Mimura have pointed out that the call for “positive images” relies on a set of heteronormative criteria that further marginalize minoritarian subjects.³⁶ For instance, Tina Chen has compellingly argued that the common opposition between identity and stereotype, the “real” and the “fake,” obfuscates the ways in which these two terms are “mutually constitutive, bound together by a shared desire for articulation and coherency in the project of producing a viable subjecthood” (2005, 60). Employing the evocative metaphor of “gaps,” Peter Feng claims that Asian American independent film “fills the gap” while being fully aware of “its own inadequate referentiality” (2002a, 16). In her study of the cinematic “composition” of Asian American women, Laura Kang explores the ways in which “image, identity, and subjectivity do not and cannot line up with each other” (2002, 75). In the same vein, Celine Parreñas Shimizu posits that a more complex account of producing and consuming Asian female “hypersexuality” is needed in order to go beyond analyses that routinely evaluate hypersexual representations as transparently injurious, exploitative,

and racist. Shimizu stresses that these analyses foreclose any possibility of agency, critique, and pleasure, thus arresting the “productive perversity” that potentially exceeds and undermines the “normative scripts for sexually and racially marginalized subjects” (2007, 21). Taken together, these critics fruitfully interrogate the framework of visibility politics organized about the nexus of positive-negative images by offering incisive analyses concerning oppositional modes of production and perverse viewerships. These sophisticated readings—informed by diverse schools of thought, including post-structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, feminist theory, queer theory, sexuality studies, critical race theory, and diaspora studies—constitute an exciting new development in Asian American media studies with their vigilant attention to the politics of representation, one that never loses sight of the political stakes involved for minoritarian subjects who are seldom given the power to represent themselves.

One dynamic response espoused by Darrell Hamamoto, and one I enthusiastically endorse, is for Asian Americans to take up the camera to create a counterpornography or, to use Hamamoto’s phrasing, a “Joy Fuck Club.” As he observes, “Asian Americans have grappled with a psychosexual self-alienation that stems from a racialized sexuality shaped and sometimes deformed by social forces” (2000, 63). This statement usefully underscores the deleterious psychic effects of racial-sexual oppression and their transcription into moving-image media. While this point appears self-evident at first glance, a closer reading uncovers the problematic assumption that there exists an authentic, unalienated sexuality prior to racist regulation and discrimination. In short, it ignores the work of representation in shaping, forming, and deforming Asian American sexuality. In a more nuanced analysis, Celine Parreñas Shimizu responds to straight Asian American men’s “strait-jacket sexuality”—which she defines as the quandary of “asexuality/effeminacy/queerness”—with a radical call for an “ethical manhood” (2012, 15). Instead of protesting against the racial-sexual humiliations inflicted on Asian American subjects, the concept of ethical manhood, argues Shimizu, highlights how straight Asian American men assert power over others in some contexts even as they suffer from being stripped of power in others. A crucial component of ethical manhood involves the acknowledgment of vulnerability and the commitment to care for others. The emphasis on exposure and openness in this revisioning of heterosexual Asian American masculinity strongly resonates with my thinking around gay Asian American bottomhood. It is worth noting, however, that asexuality/effeminacy/queerness

would only function as straitjackets for Asian American male subjects who remain enamored, even if residually, of the privileges of dominant masculinity. For those already excluded from the confines of heteronormativity, asexuality/effeminacy/queerness constitute, if not quite badges of pride, then insignias of social recognition and intelligible identities.

My study profits greatly from the groundbreaking work on Asian American sexuality and visual culture by scholars such as Hamamoto and Shimizu, alongside others noted above. Their incisive writings contest the phobic resistance by some Asian American culture critics to looking seriously at explicit sexual imagery. My concentration on visual culture constitutes a vital site for the investigation of Asian bottomhood due to these texts' expansive circulation and unpredictable modes of reception, especially when these texts depart from the familiar heterosexual scenario. For it is through the mass media such as film, television, video, and the Internet that one learns, recognizes, and resists one's racial, class, gender, and sexual positionings. By rendering on-scene what should remain obscene (off-scene), by screening and speaking "sex in public," the sexual representations I analyze in this book contribute to a queer Asian American world-making project that troubles and exceeds heteronormative intimate forms that are linked "to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation" (Berlant and Warner 1998, 322), referents that have been consistently privileged in conventional gay and lesbian and Asian American historiographies. Due to their queer sexual "content" and racial "inscrutability," these texts frequently fail to register as legitimate documents of culture. To be sure, an affirmative exploration of bottomhood disrupts the usual assumptions of what counts as political intervention. In a representational struggle centered around a politics of visibility (e.g., looking for and/or restoring the Asian penis), the re-deployment of Asian American masculinity based on homosexualized, feminizing bottomhood would appear to compound the ample visible evidence of the hole (anus-as-cunt) in Asian American sexual representation. However, I maintain that deploying gay Asian bottomhood as a hermeneutic, a tactic of intervention, reconfigures gay Asian American bottomhood as a practice of joy.

My methodology of reading as a bottom—that is, reading like, alongside, nearby, and beside—combines what Eve Sedgwick calls a paranoid mode with a reparative mode of analysis. It unpacks the social, cultural, and political meanings of film and media texts and explores how the same texts affect viewers viscerally. Along with ideological exposure, my readings also reflect

on the pleasures and surprises that touch and move the bodies of viewers. The unanticipated flashes of anger, attraction, arousal, disgust, and repulsion, these moments of being caught up and taken in by images, reveal the complicated ways in which viewers, naively and critically, sense and make sense of moving-image media. Attention to more embodied modes of experiencing the movies allows for a richer understanding of how their spectacles and sensuousness work and how they work on us. These embodied practices manifest themselves most sumptuously in “body genres” (e.g., melodrama, horror, pornography), experimental film, and digital media; but it is certainly the case that all types of moving-image media engage not just our sight and hearing but also the senses of touch and smell as well.³⁷ Throughout this introduction, I have remarked on the persistent tension between the social and political import of bottomhood (what it means) and the physiological experience of bottomhood (how it feels). The medium of film/video, with its passionate hailing of both our intellects and our loins, offers a fuller account of the subjectivities of those relegated to bottom positionings, on and off the screen. On the one hand, through its gendered and racialized formal codes and narrative conventions, dominant film and video portray Asian American men as feminized, emasculated, marginal subjects of representation. On the other hand, they also provide visual and aural access to how bottomhood can be experienced differently—socially, politically, and sensationally. That is to say, film and video mediate the pressures between bottomhood’s ideological and carnal effects.

In the place of redress and reparation for representational harm, *A View from the Bottom* considers subjects that do not seek to overcome injury but those that have learned to live with past and present damage, in particular, everyday injuries marked by gender, race, and sexuality, that cannot find relief or make amends through legitimate social or political means. Inspired by a politics of the behind, the outmoded, the embarrassing, 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. Each chapter explores the vicissitudes of bottomhood in their sexual, social, affective, and aesthetic dimensions, with emphasis on certain aspects depending on the text under discussion. Inevitably, there are overlaps, repetitions, and revisions of concepts, ideas, and arguments. A fledgling idea in one chapter gets a fuller ex-

amination in a later chapter; an argument about gay video porn recurs in a different guise in a discussion about a narrative feature film. Rather than an exhaustive survey of all the manifestations of Asian American bottomhood in the history of film and video, I zero in on a few key case studies drawn from different genres (U.S. gay video pornography, Hollywood narrative film, French art film, Asian diasporic experimental documentary, and gay sex websites). The range of texts suggests that Asian bottomhood permeates diverse portrayals of Asian manhood in different media genres and historical periods. One significant link across the chapters is the alignment of Asian bottomhood with the feminine, a link that contests the hyper-masculinization of bottoming. Another is the manner in which bottomhood is variously acknowledged, challenged, rejected, and embraced. Emulating the complexities of top-bottom interplays of power and pleasure, I have resisted the imposition of a temporal order or narrative coherence onto these open-ended texts.

The first chapter, “The Rise, and Fall, of a Gay Asian American Porn Star,” begins our investigation of Asian American masculinity and sexual representation through the dyad of top-bottom masculinities in the star text of porn star Brandon Lee. I posit that Lee’s claim to fame as an Asian top performer in his early videos is secured through his “racial packaging” as an assimilated Asian American and the relegation of his FOB (fresh off the boat) Asian immigrant costars to the abject position of bottom. However, Lee’s compelling performance in his recent videos as an aggressive bottom suggests that the borders between American/Asian, top/bottom, and dominance/submission cannot be steadfastly maintained. Unsettling these dichotomies, I argue for the position of the Asian immigrant as a desiring subject that buttresses and undermines the Orientalist fantasies animated in these porn videos.

Chapter 2, “Reflections on an Asian Bottom,” expands the conceptualization of bottomhood by considering its manifestations as effeminacy, queer domesticity, social rank, and cinematic style. Focusing on the effeminate Filipino houseboy, Anacleto, in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (dir. John Huston, 1967), the chapter analyzes the ways in which this marginal supporting character radically inverts the narrative’s social hierarchies. Crucially, his bottom sensibility structures the very form of the film, inscribing a receptive filmic gaze, an “anal vision,” that conscripts not only the other characters but also the spectator. In light of linear narratives of progress around LGBT media (e.g., global queering), I contend that Huston’s Hollywood production actually grants Anacleto much more narrative influence than contemporary gay

pornography affords its Asian bottom performers, a move that effectively severs any connection between a text's level of sexual explicitness and its political progressiveness.

Moving from a top porn star who (finally) bottoms to an "asexual" houseboy who wreaks social-sexual havoc in a military milieu with his effeminate acting out, chapter 3, "*The Lover's 'Gorgeous Ass,'*" turns its attention to a romantic leading man whose physical weakness and emotional fragility seduce a young white girl. Looking at Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Lover* (1992), I argue that even in a blatantly heterosexual love story, Asian male sexual prowess continues to be intimately linked with bottomhood. It finds expression here in the Chinese lover's shameful, "soft" masculinity and the literal exposure of his buttocks in the film's scandalous sex scenes. But rather than protesting the conflation of Asian and anus, I contend that the film's intense specularization of the lover's ass resignifies it, no longer as the sign of lack and absence, but instead as a pleasing site of sexual agency.

Chapter 4, "The Politics of Starch," continues the exploration of how Asian bottomhood functions as a catalyst for interracial desire examined in the previous three chapters. It returns to the central issues covered in the first chapter by looking at the ideological ramifications of top-bottom positionings in the context of gay male sexual representation. Whereas chapter 1 deals with the commercial gay porn industry, this last chapter focuses on work produced by gay Asian men as a critical response to those pornographic positionings of Asian men. It trains its analytic lens on a group of experimental documentaries made by gay Asian diasporic artists in the 1990s, including *Slanted Vision* (dir. Ming-Yuen S. Ma, 1995), *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven* (dir. Nguyen Tan Hoang, 1995), *China Dolls* (dir. Tony Ayres, 1997), and *The Queen's Cantonese* (dir. Wayne Yung, 1998). In an effort to retool Asian male sexuality, these works "reeducate" gay Asian subjects to jettison the passivity and objectification that are assumed to inhere in interracial (white-Asian) relationships in favor of the political empowerment found in egalitarian "sticky rice" (Asian-Asian) relationships. I then juxtapose another body of queer experimental and performative videos that rebuffs the documentaries' disciplinary impulse by exploring the unruly affects of bottomhood and the pleasures of subjection. That all of these projects frame their politics (and pleasure) in terms of a rejection or an embrace of bottomhood reveals the powerful hold that this particular racial-sexual positioning continues to exert over the erotic imaginaries of queer Asian subjects.

The conclusion turns to the Internet to survey the activities engaged in

by gay Asian men (GAMS) on American gay sex hookup websites. In online environments deemed open and accessible, affording new sexual freedoms, GAMS come face to face with the same old offline bigotry and “sexual racism.” I analyze the visual and textual tactics employed by GAMS to negotiate their exclusion from gay online spaces. The headless torso pictures and racialized screen names reveal the narrow conditions of visibility granted to gay Asian men. Within these limits, they nevertheless declare their sexual needs and wants, demanding full recognition as social subjects.

The unremitting focus on Asian men’s bottoms in these diverse texts’ portrayals of Asian male sexual competence articulates a particular relationship between race and visibility, and the problem that Asian bottomhood poses for dominant systems of visual representation. In her theorization of “the black femme function” in *The Witch’s Flight*, Kara Keeling (2007) describes the black femme as a figure that cannot be accommodated or made to make sense within commonsense regimes of sexuality, sociality, and the cinematic. This failure of intelligibility is due to her status as “black,” “woman,” and “lesbian,” a status that exceeds conventional organizations of subjecthood based on the requirements of compulsory heterosexuality. Keeling argues, “The black femme function points to a radical Elsewhere that is ‘outside homogenous space and time’ and that ‘does not belong to the order of the visible’” (2007, 137). As my preceding comments in this introduction have made abundantly clear, gay Asian American bottomhood registers the incomprehensible, the obscene, or, to borrow Keeling’s terminology, the “out-of-field” of both gay and Asian American discourses. Like the black femme, the Asian bottom embodies the social, sexual, political, and aesthetic point of view that no one wants to assume. In the following pages, I invite the reader to behold various embodiments of Asian male bottomhood in order to access another way of seeing, touching, feeling, and imagining the “radical Elsewhere” that bottomhood makes possible.³⁸