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## **Screening Shirtless AZN Men: The Full Frontal Power of Intimate Internet Industries**

Celine Parreñas Shimizu

### **Introduction**

Using the Internet to register one's racial identity and the particularity of one's sexual desires raises provocative questions about how one can forge an empowering identity online, especially for Asian men, whose sexualities are traditionally and widely disparaged in mainstream media.<sup>1</sup> Keni Styles, the first Western heterosexual male star of Asian descent in the global porn industry, counters the depiction of Asian men as asexual, passive, and undesirable through his tumblr blog project in which he recruits other Asian men to join him in achieving porn stardom. When demanding that his candidates not only pose in sexually provocative ways but also show their faces, he demonstrates a high awareness of the relationship between race, sex, and representation. For Styles's project, to show the full frontal power of the face is to participate in a racial project meant to increase the representations

of diverse Asian and Asian American male sexualities online. At the same time, Asian male sexuality is already present online in the form of gay cruising sites such as grindr, a location-based app with over 4 million subscribers in over 192 countries that helps connect men seeking sexual encounters with other men. In his new video *Look, I'm Azn!*, filmmaker and scholar Nguyen Tan Hoang gathers the ways in which Asian men use such online gay cruising sites to play with the visibility of their racial identity in relation to the sexual practices and partners they desire. But in this context, they refuse to show their faces because the visibility of their racial identity limits their sexual choices and possibilities.

In presenting their bodies and sexualities as both bound to their faces and unbound by them, these intimate Internet industry producers work to provide a better understanding of economies of pleasure across difference and inequality. By “intimate Internet industry” I refer to the online production and consumption of the body. My discussion of the intimate Internet industry focuses more on the construction of intimacy and less on the political economy of the industry. My concern is over how Asian men utilize the Internet to reconstruct images of them as intimate subjects. How do they establish themselves as subjects of pleasure who also are consumers of their racial and sexual images via the Internet? As visual brokers of subaltern intimacy, they engage racialized masculinity as it is produced and redeployed in intimate Internet industries. They do so to subvert established negative representations and defy their sexual racialization. In their use of porn and explicit imagery on the Internet, Asian male sex workers and performers, who are also consumers, combine pleasure and politics to critique the limits placed on their sexual choices and opportunities.

By evaluating the full-frontal casting call initiated by Keni Styles, the first Asian heterosexual porn star, on his LuckyAsianGuy tumblr account, and the art video *Look I'm AZN!* by Nguyen Tan Hoang, who studies the self-representational strategies of Asian men on gay cruising sites, I identify intimate representations as social interventions. I argue that here, representations address inequality at the site of intimacy. Moreover, these performances confront the images of the past with assertions of the present and their presence. These media makers do creative work that uses the Internet to build community, create new aesthetics, and articulate their desires as

defiant of the norms. In revealing the limits of existing norms of beauty and desirability in representations that highlight the Asian male face and chest, their new and more inclusive point of view demands new identifications from spectators and other consumers relating to the image of Asian men. These media makers use intimate Internet industries to express their desires to be loved, to be touched, and to have sex; and in doing so, they claim public validation and space for the liberation of their wants, wishes, and lives. Ultimately, I look to Keni Styles's and Nguyen Tan Hoang's projects as more ethical alternatives to the potential of what I call the new Asian American male media empire.

I begin by describing the political economy of the intimate Internet industry as a postmodern regime of accumulation, meaning a decentered and aesthetic-driven economy.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I establish it as an economy that produces multiple cultural constructions of masculinity, encompassing hegemonic and alternative forms of masculinity. Extending political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's conceptualizations of empire and how it can be challenged, I then theorize how intimate representations can make critical social interventions. This context then allows us to delve into how both Keni Styles and Hoang Tan Nguyen harness intimate Internet industries and use the racialized and sexualized bodies of Asian and Asian American men as a site of resistance and redefinition.

### **Working Intimacy on the Internet in the Context of Asian/American Male Media Empire**

The online video *Bananapocalypse*, released in June 2012, announces the launch of the You Offend Me You Offend My Family network (also known as YOMYOMF) on YouTube, a video-sharing site where users can disseminate and consume videos from all over the world. Comprising young, Asian American male producers, *Bananapocalypse* brings together Justin Lin, arguably the premiere Hollywood director of the millennial generation, and two of YouTube's top twenty biggest megastars, Ryan Higa and Kevin Jumba, who each possess millions of followers and over a billion views on their YouTube channels. The five-minute video is a star-studded, action-packed bromance with a racialized agenda. The video depicts strong, sexy

Asian males and humorously refutes key Asian American stereotypes. But it also reveals anxieties about queer masculinity in jokes about cavity searches and the ridiculing of a queer figure (a plump, dark-skinned Indian man in a cropped shirt and Daisy Duke shorts). We also see familiar images of sexy women in servile roles (in this case, delivering a banana that eventually sparks the titular apocalyptic fight scene) and another holding a peeled banana she is about to eat at the close of the video. This video makes clear how Internet industries of entertainment can become terrains of struggle for recognition and representation for minority communities. But in this case, it does so through a show of aggressive male power that ridicules queerness and subordinates women in the narrative. And so, in this new dawn of Internet representation, *Bananapocalypse* perpetuates an aggressive, heterosexual male authorship of Asian American problems of representation, in popular culture and beyond.

At the margins of the Internet, Asian and Asian American men working in pornography and gay cruising sites not only engage the power of Internet pornography to decenter industry representations of Asian male sexuality, but they also use online technologies to directly fulfill desires that those representations do not allow. I further define intimate Internet industries as the engagement of creative labor in the authorship and spectatorship of sexual and gendered representations of race, class, sex, and gender by Asian and Asian American men online. The significance of this engagement can be better understood within the context of Internet porn as an industry, which embodies what David Harvey would describe as a postmodern regime of accumulation as it is decentered, dispersed, based on aesthetics (and not ethics), and reliant on spectacle.<sup>3</sup> The size of the market is very hard to determine, and the numbers vary. The *Smithsonian Magazine* article “The Internet Is Still for Porn . . .” claims, “Some estimates put porn at 30% of all Internet traffic.”<sup>4</sup> They juxtapose this against the *Forbes Magazine* interview “How Much of the Internet Is Actually for Porn” with neurologist and coauthor of *A Billion Wicked Thoughts (A Book and a Blog)* Ogi Ogas who describes how a more realistic number requires nuanced explanation: “In 2010, out of the million most popular (most trafficked) websites in the world, 42,337 were sex related. That’s about 4% of the sites.” Moreover, beginning in July 2009, for a year, “about 13% of Web searches were for erotic content.”

Ogas attributes the difficulty of pinning down a number to the enormity of the web and its ever changing “dynamic.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, even more recently, the “new porn website Paint Bottle” is quoted in the *Huffington Post* “Tech” page as describing how “porn sites get more visitors each month than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter combined.” Indeed, the Paint Bottle infographic claims, “EVERYONE YOU KNOW IS WATCHING PORN,” including “70% of men and 30% of women and the numbers are increasing every week.”<sup>6</sup>

The market is primarily located in the United States, while its main industry looks out to “the rest of the world” in terms of its future growth.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the web is decentering its industry production from large adult-video companies such as VIVID to individually produced porn websites by adult stars whose audiences demand more individualized content for pay, as well as sites featuring “amateur” couples who perform certain sex acts at the requests of their live, paying audiences, such as the couple featured on the ABC News show *Nightline*.<sup>8</sup> Porn production on the Internet disperses the center of porn production away from the typical location of California’s San Fernando Valley to a proliferation of sites all over the globe. In addition, new laws that place condom restrictions on pornography practices threaten to move the industry out of its current epicenter at Los Angeles, which has seen a decline in the number of production permits for shooting pornography in recent months.<sup>9</sup> The political economy of this industry is changing along with the dynamics of Internet porn production in the United States and beyond. Margret Grebowicz, in her book *Why Internet Porn Matters*, argues that the “Internet fundamentally changes the social meaning of pornography by embedding it squarely in the epistemological shift from knowledge to information [that is] democratically accessible to everyone.”<sup>10</sup> She argues that Internet porn is a unique object that “deserves particular attention from feminist and other liberationist projects” for its special ability to wrestle with issues of freedom.<sup>11</sup> Yet she also claims that issues of race have not necessarily transformed in the proliferation of Internet porn, which I dispute. In their self-authored representations online, Asian and Asian American men intimately disclose their anxieties, rather than mask them with a macho posturing that falls into the trap of vilifying femininity, womanhood, and queerness. In the sites I analyze here, Asian American men represent themselves, their identities, and practices in very personal

and bodily terms when they attempt to enter the pornography industry or find a sexual partner online. They reveal their own hurt, rather than disparage others.

### Intimate Representation as Social Intervention

In the last century, Hollywood extended the imperial reach of the United States, determining a global language of desire and beauty in its own cinematic image—and one that serves its own interests. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define imperialism as the “Leviathan that overarched its social domain and imposed hierarchical territorial boundaries, both to police the purity of its own identity and to exclude all that was other.”<sup>12</sup> I extend this frame to Hollywood, which partook greatly in what Neferti Tadiar calls the “infantilization” of the third world in a “discourse . . . built up from an exchange of representations that is most evident in the media.”<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. Jordan, in his book *Movies and the Reagan Presidency*, argues that Hollywood films spread a view that naturalized systemic poverty to a biological predisposition for laziness while heroizing individuals in an oversimplification of such issues.<sup>14</sup> In *Dream Factories of a Former Colony: American Fantasies, Philippine Cinema*, J. B. Capino illustrates the point: “While the former subjects of U.S. colonialism remain practically invisible in Hollywood pictures, Americans and the states have kept their place as the primary others and elsewhere in Philippine cinema.”<sup>15</sup> Capino also points to the “bonds” formed between the “marginal national cinema and dominant global cinema,” revealing the dynamic ways Filipinos and third world people recast and transform US fantasies for their own purposes—political and pleasurable.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the “third cinema” movement from Latin America, Africa, and Asia responded to the imperial reach of Hollywood to craft its own logics, temporal and spatial logistics, and aesthetics as a social and national political movement.<sup>17</sup>

Today, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri present the death of imperialism and the dawn of empire.<sup>18</sup> They define empire as the “decentered and deterritorializ[ed] apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm . . . [to] manage hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, [and] plural exchanges.”<sup>19</sup> Extending my metaphor, if Hollywood is imperialism,

then we now see its twilight, as independent and Internet circuits of production diversify the archive of images circulating the globe. But, while the hierarchy of representation may seem to be decentered, social inequalities have not dissipated but continue to organize access to representation. The digital divide persists, and the new media landscape is still constituted by a constellation of authors with access to power and voice.<sup>20</sup> The presence of Asian Americans at the top of the list of YouTube producers and the launching of YOMYOMF, with its numerous videos since, critique existing US industry representation. However, they do so as agents of empire because of their access to technologies of representation. As such, even as minorities, they do represent a powerful entity of individual authors who influence so many. That is, despite their minority status, they wield the apparatus of representation in the new mainstream in which young people no longer watch network television but free shows online. Thus, they not only critique Hollywood, but their works are also bringing Hollywood to them. They receive success, too, for their content is ultimately emerging from a class-privileged and largely heterosexual male culture. They are markers of globalization in how they move as people, shape markets, produce cool new goods, and earn money that travels across borders. As Hardt and Negri note, in “the lessening of national sovereignty . . . the nation state has less and less power to regulate these flows and impose its authority over the economy.”<sup>21</sup> What is more clear now is the presence of what Trinh T. Minh-ha has articulated as the ever presence of “the third world in the first, and vice versa.”<sup>22</sup> These particular minority authors of new media represent different regimes that hold power in empire, as captured in the privileging of male subjectivity in their representation of women and the bromance among its primarily male authors.

In light of these persistent inequalities, how do we map the resistance found in new media production by Asian and Asian American men working in pornography and gay cruising sites online? That is, while they are a part of the oppressed minority, they also wield gender privilege. They typically speak for their minority communities even if their subjectivities represent the most privileged constituents. This position at the crossroads, of marginalized minoritization and of wielding industry power, helps to constitute them as part of what Hardt and Negri call the multitude—those with the

potential to create counter-empire cultures and provide “alternatives within empire.” Hardt and Negri argue that the “realm of production is where social inequalities are clearly revealed and, moreover, where the most effective resistances and alternatives to the power of Empire arise.”<sup>23</sup> In comparing the work of YOMYOMF, Keni Styles, and Hoang Tan Nguyen, we can see the conflicting desires and anxieties at work in their Asian American male voices. They express political, social, economic, and sexual struggles through representations of their bodies as platforms for recognition.

Keni Styles’s [luckyasianguy.tumblr.com](http://luckyasianguy.tumblr.com)

New media forms such as Youtube, Facebook, Blogspot, Tumblr, and the websites of porn stars shift existing hierarchies of representation away from Hollywood and toward a constellation of individual uploads and websites. In the pornography industry, stars offer access to their everyday activities at home, for a fee. Well-known figures like Nina Hartley, Violet Blue, and even the ubiquitous Ron Jeremy work on blogs and maintain a rapport with their avid followers. The first Asian heterosexual porn star in the US pornography industry is Keni Styles, whose debut in 2010 generated great attention and accolades in the form of awards and nominations from Adult Video News (AVN), the Oscars of the pornography industry. As the central character in his new media sites such as [luckyasianguy.com](http://luckyasianguy.com), [supermanstamina.com](http://supermanstamina.com), and [luckyasianguy.tumblr.com](http://luckyasianguy.tumblr.com), Styles defies the lack of representation of Asians in the pornography and Hollywood industries. Thai-born, British-bred, mixed-race, slim, and dark-skinned, Keni manages his online presence in a way that gives his fans multiple opportunities to get to know him intimately. He writes on his blog about his experiences on the sets of famous porn films, his impressions as he first meets other actors, and his thoughts in the moments leading to their performances on screen. He features photography of live encounters outside the set.

Almost single-handedly, Keni Styles is utilizing Internet pornography industries to transform the way we see Asian male sexuality. In his blogs, he addresses the distorted way we define sexuality and measure success by the size of the male penis. Instead, he asserts that we need to expand our definitions of sexuality beyond the limited measure of penile size:

The whole size issue is ridiculous. You don't fuck someone with your dick, you fuck someone with your whole body, your attitude, your presence. The moment you say, "Oh, my dick is X inches long," you've let society win the battle of thinking it matters. And it just doesn't. I'm not the biggest there is, and I'm not the smallest, but I've never measured my penis against anything than a girl's vagina. If it fits and she's happy, I'm happy.<sup>24</sup>

A sense of wonder and incredulity permeates his presentation on [luckyasian.guy.tumblr.com](http://luckyasian.guy.tumblr.com), which includes interviews with the women he has sex with. He expresses disbelief at the hotness of the many women he has sex with in a diversity of daily dalliances, even as he clearly demonstrates awareness of his own attractiveness by exuding a casual confidence in his poses. He showcases their beauty and frames their presence as the most unlikely of events. It is as if he says, "Me with these hot women, and I'm an Asian!" Moreover, he engages with issues of race and sexuality in his interviews with white women and black women regarding their expectations and experiences with him as an Asian man. In these, he offers alternative masculinities that decenter the pornography industry's representations of Asian men, which rarely depict them as possessing desirable and desiring sexualities.

Recently, on his tumblr site, Styles launched an "official casting call to all Asian men interested in creating impact in Adult Entertainment!" He asks provocatively, "Could you be the next lucky Asian guy?" (January 2012). With this wording he identifies his unique position as the first Asian male to achieve straight porn stardom and characterizes his work as intervening in stereotypes attributed to Asian male sexuality. Though he does not specifically name the representations his project aims to challenge, those who respond to his call do. In their auditions or comments on his tumblr account, they consistently note the reputation of lack that places Asian men in a less romantically competitive and sexually desirable role in the West. For example, an entrant or prospect named Kev lauds Keni Styles for representing Asian male sexuality: "While Asian women are considered very sexy by the general public, Asian men are usually looked down upon as being not very masculine or sexy. Caricatures . . . stand out in many women's minds." Clearly, this contextualizes Styles's efforts.

The project aims to populate the pornography industry with other Asian men. Styles invites other Asian men whom he calls “bros” to join him in the adult industry with the clear task of creating better representations that are directly linked to racial diversity in the industry: “I’m looking for Asian male models who are active in expressing their confidence and sexuality. Those willing to ‘be the change’ and represent a positive image of Asian men.” Notable here in his criteria is the search for those Asian men who already defy the reputation of lack and inactivity through their everyday life practices. In effect, Styles wants other Asian men to show that his sexual confidence is not rare, and he wants allies in the industry in order to take on the racialization. And the casting call seeks to find those who defy and challenge, rather than buckle under, the reputation of Asian male sexual weakness. Moreover, they must demonstrate awareness of the moral panics around sexuality and the sex industry so they can deploy the full frontal power of the intimate Internet industries most effectively.

Styles is keen to identify those who are truly unready and unprepared to embrace their sexuality openly, as the adult industry requires. He weeds out those who do not want to show themselves onscreen in the audition process. One entrant writes, “Is there any way I can enter the casting without posting a picture showing my face? My dream job has always been to become a porn star however I am worried about who might see this before my career change, haha.” The face has a special significance in representation and in our social relations. The face, according to Emanuel Levinas, is the site that compels responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Keni Styles says he is “fully committed to the success of any guys I select,” and the inability and unwillingness of this man to show his face tells him the entrant is not mutually committed to that goal and thus ineligible. Here, we see that the logic of sex panic, which classifies entry into pornography as a site of shame, is not upheld. He clearly states his parameters and his priorities for making the process “transparent”: “Everything will be public for all Prospects. If your entry has been posted that is the first part of pre-selection passed.” He clarifies that the “first part of the process is to submit [not only your face but also] your shirtless picture accompanied with your email address that I will ensure to keep private and a short paragraph or few describing who you are, your sexuality and

your motivation for responding to this casting call.” Those who visit the site or are tasked with judging who will be the “next lucky Asian guy” must consider not only the face but also the chest, and the body, in its ability to speak that sexual confidence. The requirement for writing, too, shows us that the subject must also possess the ability to articulate one’s philosophy in a thoughtful manner and consciously acknowledge what it means to participate in sexual representation. In a postscript to the invitation to participate in the casting call, Styles adds, “Shots of your dick and only your dick can only tell me one thing, that is all you are . . . smh.” The acronym stands for “shaking my head” and indicates Keni Styles’s disapproval of this limited way of thinking about one’s sexuality.

Those participating in the casting call represent a diversity of young Asian American men with a range of confidence and beauty. What they share is a common demand for more representations that do justice to Asian male sexual diversity beyond what I call the straitjacketed criteria they live under. In the most recent post on February 2013, a twenty-five-year-old named Joe describes himself as “half-Asian” and states that “sometimes we get left out of both sides of the equation. Our Asian side feels like we aren’t Asian enough and vice versa [*sic*]. I want to show that we . . . take traits from both sides and create something unique.” In answering the question about who he is, his racial background emerges prominently. Joe has taken his picture with an iPhone. He stands alertly, like a young recruit, facing a mirror in his loose shorts that show a glimpse of the top of his underwear. He has closely shaven hair and a fit, hairless chest. He looks shy, as he smiles with eyes looking down. His peeking big front teeth emphasize his youthful looks. While his chest is fit, his waist widens and looks soft. He clenches his fist by his side in a kind of uncomfortable way while the other holds the iPhone up by his face. As a mixed race or *hapa* man, he identifies in his writing the crossing of borders that his racial composition embodies. Regarded separately, Asian and non-Asian parts remain discrete and insufficient. From there, he makes a link to sexuality, and one that is different. He aligns with the perception of Asians and the need “to change the view that society has [of] us . . . that we are conservative and shy, especially in the bedroom.” Ultimately, he wishes for “every race [to be] represented in

straight porn for males and females.” His overall argument highlights the inability of the stereotype to capture the complexity of his identity, which for him is linked to a love for others, regardless of racial difference.

Jimmy James, who posts on January 2012, presents sexual relations with a diversity of ethnically different women as exciting in itself. That is, he considers himself open to the diversity of sexual excitement in the expression of each woman. In this case, interracial sex scenes, like those featuring Keni Styles, particularly show Asian men “to be empowered sexually.” To show and see Asian men sexually engaged with a diversity of partners represents them in a way that should be “encouraged.” This text appears below Jimmy James’s photograph, as is the format of the [luckyasianguy.tumblr.com](http://luckyasianguy.tumblr.com) site. Unlike Joe, however, someone else has taken Jimmy James’s photo. The camera is placed below the subject, who then looks down on the viewer. Our vantage point is really at crotch level. We see a big bulky belt over white pants as Jimmy James slouches casually, in a kind of “urban” style. To say so is to racialize him as black or Latino. Jimmy James poses with his hands stuffed in his low-riding pants. Ornate tattoos embellish the bulk of his arms. On his chest, below his shoulder blades, two sharply pointed stars flank letters that read “So Cal,” which is emblazoned like graffiti on the flat, muscular space beneath his belly button. Jimmy James’s self-presentation equates sexual representation in the porn industry with masculine power that is achieved through the visual evidence of his physical engagement with a variety of women. He writes to Keni Styles twice, actually. And in the brief second letter, Jimmy James states, “We all Enjoy sex and break stereotypes I truly believe Asian men can get lucky.” Jimmy James differs from Joe, who prioritizes his unique racial mix. James presents a racialized macho posturing that he identifies as an antidote to the stereotypes that prevent Asian men from getting lucky. In presenting himself as like any other person who “Enjoys” sex, he does so while posturing as urban, or black and Latino, perceiving that he perhaps may get more lucky if he aligns himself with these other forms of racialized manhood.

In the same month, another man posts a picture of himself in action. He bends to watch a woman perform fellatio in a medium-wide profile shot. Taken from below, we see the light fixture and a smoke alarm on the ceiling above them. The text essentializes his identity as a lover of sexual

practice. He situates himself as a “struggling college student and like any college student totally in love with sex. I am very experimental and up for anything. . . . I am all about breaking down the stereotypes associated with asians and have proven this point to many a female.” Those who simply post that they like to “fuck” are not encouraged nor do they warrant a response from Styles, who encourages “being able to confidently portray other kinds of personalities . . . to succeed as a actor or performer [*sic*]. Anyone can simply ‘fuck lol.’ Next.” Styles seems to disregard entrants such as this man, who does not present an understanding of performing sexuality on screen, instead of merely loving sexual practice. Key to Styles’s criteria is an acknowledgement of the power of sexual representation and not just sexual relations.

The one photograph on his site with an “Approved” mark on its header portrays a young and fit “J,” aged 22. Showing off a very ripped torso, he wears black boxers and stands in a bathroom. Behind J on the left, dark clothes hang to frame the black iPhone he holds up with his hand. His other very large and muscular arm hangs casually at his right side. His body stands out against the black coats on the white walls. Behind him on the right, the room deepens with white towels and curtains hanging. The sink foregrounds the shot of J in the mirror. Unlike Joe, the first one I discuss, this photo does not look like a mug shot taken just anywhere. J’s text contains four paragraphs that reveal a thoughtful consideration of Keni Styles’s invitation. He begins with an argument for his selection because of his ability to deliver an excellent “screen performance.” Here, J understands sex is a production, rather than something natural or authentic that can simply be captured. At the same time, he characterizes sexual practice as a demonstration of curiosity that makes his “performance on screen” “passionate.” Next, he describes a “diligent” work ethic and an accomplished educational background, as well as his willingness to provide references from ex-lovers. He emphasizes the drive for learning and to “improve myself” before closing with a powerful plea not to allow stereotypes to overwhelm or set the terms for one’s self-perception. Instead of feeling “inadequate” and running away from one’s “unique racial qualities,” to embrace oneself is to “help” others, especially men. This is the spirit of Keni Styles’s solution to the problem of the lack of Asian male representation in porn or mainstream popular culture.

Keni Styles responds affirmatively to those who present a more complex understanding of sex, and the role of representation as that which constructs it. But here it is not enough; it must also come with a consciousness about sex, race, and representation as well as a desire to improve sexual relations on the ground. What we learn from Keni Styles's tumblr project is the collective wish to improve both the sexual lives of Asian men and their representation onscreen. We see that representation is a process that requires deliberate decision making; a successful performance requires not only good looks but also a philosophical and analytic approach to both sexuality and representation. For Styles, to be involved in the adult industry requires an awareness of the production of sexuality. The actors must understand sexuality (theirs in relation to others) and representation (the construction of it rather than its simple capturing of authenticity). Keni Styles uses intimate Internet industries in a number of websites to sexually represent the Asian male body as a form of racial resistance. Using a method that differs from the full frontal disclosure of the face, the video art by Hoang Tan Nguyen shows how the face limits the sexualities of Asian and Asian American men online.

#### Nguyen Tan Hoang's *Look I'm AZN!*

The video artist and film theorist Nguyen Tan Hoang is most known for his short video *Forever Bottom!* (1999), a four-minute classic of queer cinema. It investigates the trope of bottomhood in popular culture for gay Asian men but also celebrates it as a viable way of life and a theorization of power.<sup>26</sup> Rejecting the disparagement and shaming of bottomhood as a passive position in the gay male encounter, Nguyen celebrates the position as active and expressive of desire and as a form of social critique for gay Asian men. His latest video work, *Look I'm AZN!* (2012), a short structured in two parts, amasses the ways in which gay Asian men name themselves and image themselves in gay cruising websites. In four and a half minutes, we see the self-representation of gay Asian men gathered in textual and visual form as he takes their authorships and self-representations off the Internet. Both capture in different ways how gay Asian men define themselves in relation to their social interpellation

as racialized and sexualized subjects. In other words, they comment on their racialization in the sexual marketplace through textual and visual creativity. They rewrite the terms that define them in popular culture in order to better express their desires. And when these individual desires are juxtaposed, the homogeneous group classifications explode. Their visual images speak volumes on how they resist the sexuality assigned to them as Asians.

The first part of the video *Look I'm AZN!* collects headers of personal ads in gay cruising sites. Nguyen begins with ads regarding GAMS (gay Asian men), then proceeds to put the names in alphabetical and numeric order. Nguyen begins with *gambit*, a compelling choice of wordplay. *Gambit* indicates risk and calculation, and in the game of chess, it shows the deliberate move of losing pawns to gain advantage when opening the game. To begin with *gambit* shows us that these Asian gay male subjects are also deliberating and maneuvering, using the terms assigned to them and deploying them as risky, but with an eye to gaining a very real pleasure in identifying their specific desires.

The subjects pair *GAM*, or their self-identification or naming, with other words. We see *gambuddy69*, *GAM\_POUNDER*, *slutbubblegam*, *gam2play*, *gam2serviceyou*, *gam2all*, *gam4all*, *gam4bears*, *gam4black*, *gam4cauc* . . . *gam4gam*. The litany of text appearing and disappearing on screen, replacing each other conveniently in the same space, convincingly presents the unwieldiness of desire by and for gay Asian men. Through these word pairings, they each characterize their desire through action or preference: “*gam4hardbodies*, *gam4head1*, *gam4hung*, *gam4lover1*,” and the list goes on. The first name prefers certain fit bodies; the second, a specific sex act; the third, a particular size of penis, and the last looks for love for one. There are also those who cross boundaries. For example, *GAM 4 Bears* indicates “gay Asian man seeking bears,” typically hairy, burly, and big men who prefer similar men. Gay Asian men are typically not bears and typically do not participate prominently in bear culture, though there surely are exceptions. There are enough that they are called pandas and considered rare. In this way, the listing explodes our typical understanding of queer and Asian desires in the marketplace.

Nguyen begins his listing of terms with *GAM*, so as to orient us to the

gay Asian male reference. But from there he lists the various ways Asians identify themselves on the Internet. The first grouping is AZN, which is a shortcut for “Asian online,” and is at times capitalized and other times not. The sequence of names moves faster onscreen. He begins with “Atypical-AZNbottom, azn11, azn4azn, . . . azn4now, azn4oral, azn4sho, . . . azNerd, aznfratdude, . . . badAzn. . . .” The term *Azn* is an Internet term, and here it is deployed to represent different queer cultures online. Like the others who identify as GAMs, Azns also link this word with preference, practice, or language play. Those who use the term *Asian* similarly describe themselves as notcuteAsian or smoothbrownasian but also Asian2rideu, Asiananalstut, Asiankat, AsianKen, asiannights, and GoodVibrAsian. A diversity of sexual identities, positions, preferences, and thematics combine here. In *How to Be Gay*, David M. Halperin argues that style, as seen in visible ways of self-fashioning, carry sexual and gender meaning: “Gay male culture is a form of understanding, a way of seeing men, women and the world.”<sup>27</sup> In bringing together Azn identity categories with other categories (less likely, such as bears, and closer to common perception, like Adonis), we see an assertion of the specificity of individual desires. It is a declaration of want for others who are considered inappropriate or unexpected. An entire worldview is thus captured in the distilled choice of words. In one, two, or three words, we very clearly see an alignment with a position, a preference, a desire, and a view of the world from their perspective.

This view of the world and one’s position in it as an interpellated person whose classification does not capture one’s specific desire accomplishes a critique of popular culture. Or at the very least, it establishes a relationship to popular culture in how gay Asian men identify themselves. One calls himself “KarateKid” and another self-classifies in the recognizable image of the clothing brand that is typically white: “Asiabercrombie.” These styles that clearly identify a certain look or a certain way of being when associated with Azn, Asian, or GAM, then, make one’s identity more readable. Nguyen plays with the articulation of type when he places the following in a sequence: “AznArtFag, AznAthlete and AsianKen, AznRanger, AznSailor, asian\_slave, AsianAdonis,” or state Asian men’s preferences for frat boys, papis, or club daddies. Other terms play with language, such as *Iphoyou*, *oppa*, or *edamamme*. Typically disparaging terms such as *Oriental*, *yellow fever*, and

*rice queens* are also rewritten, or reclaimed, in ways that emphasize desire for these terms or identities. In all these, we see the articulation of desire by and for gay Asian men in relation to liberating themselves from the confines of identity categories and the cultures that too frequently limit them. Thus, a new style evolves in the combination of words—one that is more specifically a portrait and that acts as an invitation for sexual engagement. It is a naming that invites a response—to look at the speaker, and to recognize their desire. But what kind of visual image accompanies such a dynamic juxtaposition of namings, categories, and style? How can it emphasize the need to destabilize what *Asian*, *Azn*, or *GAM* means in the sexual market?

The second part of the video assembles shirtless photos posted by gay Asian men on cruising websites. This decision to post chests rather than faces avoids the limitations placed on gay Asian men by their racialization, which is too many times based on the Asian face, as theorized and historicized by David Palumbo-Liu in *Asian/American*.<sup>28</sup> That is, they avoid showing their face so that their racialization as Asians does not limit their sexual choices. They want to be free from the associations typically made for gay Asians and widen the availability of sexual options for themselves in the initial moments of their entry into the Internet marketplace. Here, the face functions differently than in the Styles project, in which the face must be visible. To reveal the face in Styles's project is to be conscious of racial identity in pornography. However, for Nguyen, the face is a limitation. It is a site for others to project and delimit sexuality. To challenge that projection, Nguyen hides the face in order to demand a different relationship to the consciousness that bears it.

In this sequence of images, Nguyen begins with wide shots of men, showing their full shirtless bodies, typically in underwear. The images feature slim, muscular men as well as burly, big men. They display themselves in bed, in the locker room, the bathroom, the backyard, the mirror, on the beach, or outside in the mountains. While we see a diversity of locations, we do not see faces. Nguyen then moves to torsos, similarly shot in a diversity of backgrounds. The images then move to a dancelike phase as arms and hands play more prominently with covering body parts or emphasizing others. The arms and hands move like a dance as we cut from shots of the same size: medium-wide image to medium-wide image. When gay Asian men's arms and hands touch themselves, either to cover body parts or to invite

sexualization, the invitation to be touched is clear. We then see a variety of shots connected by each subject holding an iPhone to take pictures of himself. This raises our awareness of the technologies of representation. We then see a series of male torsos as they lie down in bed sheets. The concluding shots feature the men's nipples prominently in the framing of the image. They are dark and set in bodies with differing levels of fitness. Some chests are bursting with muscle, while others remain flat and thin. The images conclude as dandelions rise up in special effects onscreen.

The images described above collect a wide range of self-representations by a large diversity of gay Asian men. When reading them together onscreen, we see that they each attempt to make less prominent the Asian face, which determines and fixes their racial identity. The shirtless bodies make racial identities much vaguer and more difficult to determine. Because the bodies are harder to fix into a classification, they are also freer. Desire is set loose from racialization. In her new book *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Holland argues that racism enters into our most intimate choices, even the very sites where we seek pleasure. It is a constitutive force that permeates all areas of relationships that we consider our most close. Not only do we feel the other's different body as separate from our own, but we also feel the way touch introduces possibilities for the past, present, and future. Touch has the power to "assume . . . experiential knowledge, while it also calls upon its witnesses and players to testify to it as connection and repudiation, making it part of the person's experience and daring her to dis-own it."<sup>29</sup> In representations of erotics between racial others, she says that "touch is so compelling . . . that the prevailing narrative of race is undone and a multitude of possibilities find fruition."<sup>30</sup> I extend Holland's theorization to the site of intimate Internet sites and the wish for touch that they clearly express, which is oftentimes intertwined with the identity categories that limit them, as well as others. What is so fascinating is that the visceral is at work here. The online sites and art forms I study represent a genre that can lead to action beyond the screen. It is also a medium that can generate self-touch, so that while it looks like a two-dimensional image, it compels and enables a physical experience through the power of the visual, while at first remaining a virtual medium. When the classificatory terms of racism become the material for eroticism, such as when the identity text and the identity

image that offers to serve someone else such as GAM<sub>4u</sub> or GAM<sub>4head1</sub>, the acknowledgment of such desires does not mean one lives in a state of false consciousness of bottomhood as disparaging or shameful. Instead, it shows that “we are apparently incapable of living without categories of difference, even when those categories are at worse hurtful and at best fictions in and of themselves.”<sup>31</sup> These identity texts and identity images are articulations for the desire to be touched and the possibility of becoming both connected to and transformed by another.

In Keni Styles’s [luckyasianguy.tumblr.com](http://luckyasianguy.tumblr.com) and in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s *Look I’m Azn!*, Asian men use both their written text and self-naming in order to make their identities and desires as Azn, GAM, or Asian American men known. They then use images of their shirtless selves to express a relationship to the popular criteria that judges them as desirable or not in terms of their gender and sexual practices as men. In the first case, the Asian/American men seek to address their representations in heterosexual adult industry movies as contrary to or misrepresentative of the active lives they lead off-screen. Styles demands that the contest entrants express awareness of the power of representation to construct the sexualities that viewers consume, and in the process challenge the way their sexuality has been racialized. A notable dynamic in this project is the open way that straight Asian men discuss their heterosexuality. In doing so, they acknowledge the attribution of failure to their racial grouping directly, refusing to ignore it or stay silent about it. It is a brotherly address of a shared racial sexualization that is not common in representations of Asian men, with the exception of the film *Better Luck Tomorrow* and the Harold and Kumar series. Too frequently, Asian men in the movies are alone as characters, with other Asian men nonexistent or underdeveloped.

These two projects also highlight the different dilemmas straight and gay Asian men face. One interaction on Keni Styles’s tumblr alludes to this. In response to a viewer who says, “Don’t forget your gay fans,” Keni Styles acknowledges him and clarifies, “Although I am always aware of my gay fans, this project will focus on heterosexual scenes.” In the Keni Styles’s heterosexual site, the stigma is in pornification, while in the gay Asian male site, the body is offered for sex online as part of gay social ritual. In this scene, text and visualization work differently. Nguyen’s project, situated in

the gay and queer Asian sexual marketplace, presents a textual assertion of Asian, Azn, and Oriental gay identities paired with actions, identities, and desires deemed different or disparaging. It reclaims these identities in terms that own those desires. The images that accompany this platform revoke the face's power to determine the racial meaning of these men's sexualities. In doing so, they liberate their sexuality and secure more possibilities for pleasure. In this short film, as they do on the gay cruising sites, gay Asian men deploy textual identity and visual identity in ways that collide and cooperate.

### In Closing

The use of the Internet as a means of constructing representation signifies the death of the centralized industry. Yet, decentralization has not necessarily signaled the emergence of a heterotopia, that is, a space that promotes nonhegemonic conditions.<sup>32</sup> To establish the proliferation of a hegemonic masculinity by Asian men, *You Offend Me You Offend My Family's Bananapocalypse* mentioned earlier begins my meditation on intimate Internet industries and Asian male use of this technology in creating Asian male subjectivities. What I fear in this powerful launching, which declares the death of the centralized industry, is the proliferation of a new Asian American male empire of representation that articulates racial problems of representation as male and renders Asian American women as derivative to the narrative, prominent only as banana-feeding dolls, banana-serving hotties, and dancers in the sense of the video ho. Speaking from the margins, Keni Styles and Nguyen Tan Hoang give us hope when approaching the problem ethically. The call straight Styles and queer Nguyen make is succinct. They will not disparage others, whether women or gay men. They each declare through their textual and visual work their demand for inclusion in their sexual networks. They attempt to legitimize their individual desires in the face of their classifications. Nonetheless, they use those namings as part of themselves and declare them a part of their intimate lives: GAM, Azn, Asian. They cannot get away from these racial terms. This is how they are hailed, and so they use them to demand recognition in their own more specific terms. And they do so in order to be seen, to be touched, to be held, to get laid, to come into the light, and to cum.

The shirtless bodies of Azn men critique the limits placed upon their everyday life, especially in relation to their sexual choices. When they pair words like *GAM*, *Azn*, *Oriental*, *Asian*, or other self-identifiers with other names, ways of life, and acts, they attempt to create new spaces, communities, and opportunities. They refute and refuse hierarchies of desire that place them as undesirable and uncompetitive in the marketplace of sex and romance by insistently inviting their potential lovers to look at them anew. The Internet media that they produce while expressing their intimate desires aims to make real a world not yet onscreen. Once we see them, their acts of creation—making images of their version of the world fueled by their own desires—bring us closer to them and make these worlds and desires legible and familiar. These, then, are political representations that transform their lives, as well as the viewers, making them more tangible, touchable, and realizable.

## Notes

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