

Department of English  
22 McCosh Hall  
Princeton, New Jersey 08544-1016  
T 609-258-4061 F 609-258-1607

Class of 2024

Student Name: Elliot Hyon

Title: *Displaced and Borderless: Locating a Queer Poetics of Flight and Desire in Giovanni's Room and On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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*Queer lives have always threatened borders*, Elliot Hyon remarks in the first sentence of *Displaced and Borderless: Locating a Queer Poetics of Flight and Desire in Giovanni's Room and On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, thus introducing with admirable precision the central claim of his cogent and resonant study. The borders that queer lives threaten are those that delimit and thus distort sexuality, ethnicity and (by homogenizing it) narrative temporality. In other words, the borders that queer lives threaten are the borders that threaten queer lives, or indeed, any life that fears the charge of deviancy that is caught up with stigma of queerness. How queer lives live nonetheless; how queer people, in various states of exile, denigration, exploitation and terror find ways to make new homes for themselves even in the midst of societies that would destroy or deny them; how queer people find ways of being in the world by transgressing the various binaries and boundaries disinclined to acknowledge that being: this is the subject of Mr. Hyon's thesis:

*By uncovering submerged histories that document alternative desires, pleasures, and identities, the limitations of colonial logic expose the often arbitrary, easily transgressed partition that separates social normativity from deviance. At the periphery of this construction, queer people signal not only where the border begins, but more importantly what also can be recovered from beyond this frontier.*

By Mr. Hyon's lights, the lives of queer people dwell in a place between and beyond a range of familiar, differentially defined binaries that separate the "normal" from the "pathological" as Canguilhem first put it. The characters that Baldwin and Vuong set out slip between the lines of such binaries. Moreover, and more materially, queer lives such as those that Baldwin and Vuong represent are made homeless by various political forces that cast them into various forms of exile, and throughout this thesis Mr. Hyon recognizes how these various forces and forms work to reinforce and sometimes disturb one another.

In his first chapter, *Representing Colonial Formations of Race and Sexuality: Displacement and Abjection of the Queer Body*, Mr. Hyon recognizes that exile is hardly the royal road to liberation. As Mr. Hyon points out, David, the profoundly unreliable narrator of *Giovanni's Room* seeks to escape persecution and marginalization at home, goes to France where he relies on his privilege as a rich white American man to exploit young men more powerless than he is. As David's story reminds us (if we need reminding), it's impossible to disentangle sexual desire from other social determinations, such as race and class. If David's sexual desire for men drives him into exile, it is an exile in which



he recapitulates the colonial conquest of his ancestors, as he himself all but announces in the famous, startling first sentence of the novel:

*My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past.*

For Mr. Hyon and the theorists, artists and activists whose work informs his, the white homosexual expatriate's exploitation of young men, who are figuratively, more or less colored, recapitulates the colonial exploitation conducted by his ancestors: *David's abuse of Joey [and Giovanni] implicates him in the monolithic structures of race and sexuality*. Mr. Hyon's perspicacious readings of Baldwin's great novel renders explicit and central the colonial subtext of a story consisting ostensibly of whites only. The amnesia that David and his French counterparts, wealthy and historically entitled homosexual men seek in alcohol and sexual consumption can't conceal their continuing complicity with the structures of power which exploit and imprison and send into flight queer lives, including their own.

The single but telling reference to Indochina in Giovanni's Room gives way to the ubiquitous, of often absent presence of the colonial history of Vietnam in On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous. The novel *takes place in a racialized and sexualized historical context that inspires and drives the narrative forward by strategically weaving different temporal and spatial settings during and after the Vietnam War*. Drawing on a range of historical and theoretical accounts, Mr. Hyon considers the ways that the sexual exploitation of young Asian men recapitulates and deepens colonial exploitation in and beyond Vietnam. The white homosexual associates deviance with the Asian other, in order to disassociate it from himself: *the rules, they were already inside us*, Little Dog realizes, and while he regards sex

*as a form of liberation, taking flight from the confining structures that render him abject . . . Trevor's rejection of the passive role grounds him and renders him immobile. The language of "girl" and "bitch" build upon each other to degrade Little Dog and deny him whatever agency he believed he had in taking ownership of the submissive role during their sexual activities.*

"[T]he rules already inside us" that require a white American man to reject the passive role to protect his male status extend to associate the enfranchisement of African American men with the assertion of their hyper-masculinity. Protecting or producing the normal masculine subject requires the more or less ruthless habit of casting as other those sexual practices that threaten normal manhood, as it has come to be defined.

In his second chapter, *Narrativizing the Afterlives of Colonial Logic: Traumatic Memory and Nonlinear Plot Structured in the Novel*, Mr. Hyon with characteristic skill and sweep, enlists Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection and Saidya Hartman's "theory of critical fabulation" to light up the ways that Vuong and Baldwin fragment, subvert and suspend linear narrative to uncover *the traumatic effects of abjection resulting from colonial infrastructure and its afterlives*. Such queering of narrative labors to *unsettle the historical amnesia that prevents a reckoning with the traumas of colonial and sexual violence*.

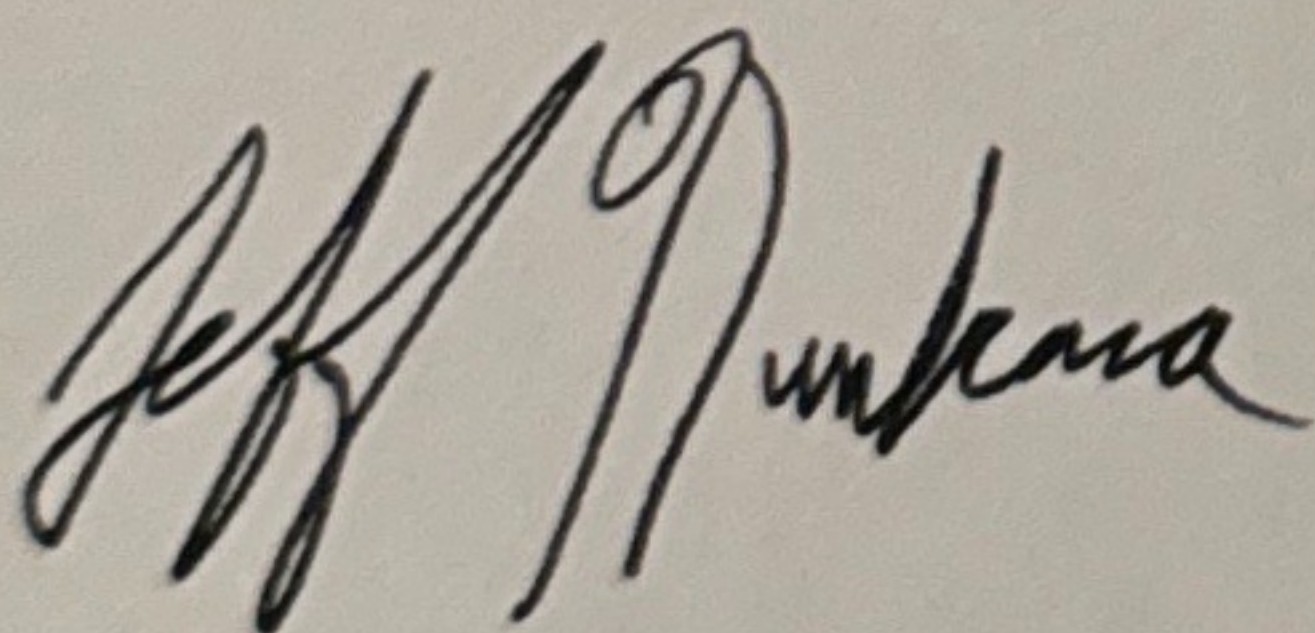
In his third chapter, *Erotics of Power: Negotiating Queer Desire through a Dialectics of Flight*, Mr. Hyon returns to the queer quarrel with borders, this time to sound a few more hopeful notes. While the peripatetic but confined David in Giovanni's Room merely recapitulates the oppression he seeks



to evade by his flight to foreign parts, the story of Little Dog in On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous includes happier possibilities. Overcoming, or at least briefly suspending the long history of denigration that casts Asian men as not real men at all, Little Dog, owns, as it were, his sexual passivity, and thus takes flight at least briefly from the confinements of colonial history, resituating *sex as a radical act, granting himself agency over the passive role and eliding the colonial barriers that have governed his sexuality.*

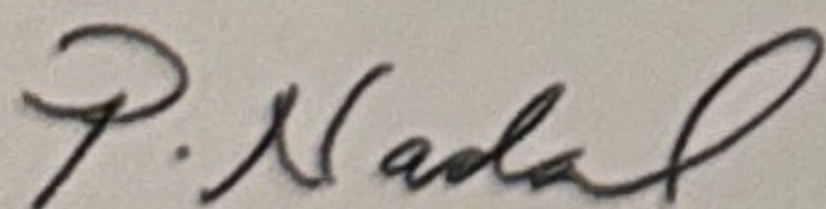
Mr. Hyon has written an important, perceptive and in places, brilliant thesis. His readings of Baldwin and Vuong are often revelatory. In the case of a thesis this fine, criticism might seem a tad churlish, but precisely because it is so good, we would invite Mr. Hyon to think about a kind of tautology that haunts some of his work here. There are places where a univocally coalitional theoretical politics limits his usual lucidity. It is surely the case that *David's abuse of Joey implicates him in the monolithic structures of race and sexuality and a colonial history of exploitation and abuse*, but perhaps there are sexual abuses that are not racial, just as there are racial abuses which are not sexual. Some of those may even be conducted by, to, against and for queer subjects. A question that Mr. Hyon might want to ask is this: does his conception of queerness embrace people whose racial or class politics offend or alienate us? There are places in this thesis where queer appears to mean all that unsettles bad boundaries, and where the bad boundaries are all the same boundary. How would David's exploits with and exploitation of metaphorically black men differ from exploits with and exploitation of literally black men? While it is surely true that the exploitations and dominations of capital, colonialism and heteronormativity are historically and metaphorically implicated with one another, are they the same? If not, what is the exact nature of their alliance? Is it possible to be a reactionary queer? Is David's life in Giovanni's Room a queer life? If the answer to these questions is no, why not, exactly?

These questions stand, so to speak, on the metaphorical shoulders of Mr. Hyon's wonderful thesis. We couldn't even ask about the theory that underwrites and inspires this sometimes dazzling study were it not for the sometimes dazzling clarity with which he presents that theory. Mr. Hyon has written an extraordinary thesis. He has earned our utmost admiration.



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Jeff Nunokawa



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Paul Nadal