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The Queer Methodologies of Vietnamese Diaspora Artists: Stardom, Spectatorship, and Other Pop Cultural Encounters

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

The Queer Methodologies of Vietnamese Diaspora Artists: Stardom, Spectatorship, and Other  
Pop Cultural Encounters

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Peter Hoc McEldowney

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki, Chair  
Professor Roberta Wue  
Professor Linda Trinh Vo  
Professor Bridget R. Cooks

2022



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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The Queer Methodologies of Vietnamese Diaspora Artists: Stardom, Spectatorship, and Other

Pop Cultural Encounters

by

Peter Hoc McEldowney

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki, Chair

This thesis is a survey of four Vietnamese American artists, whose queer identifications and disidentifications trouble easy categories of identity. The Vietnamese refugee and the queer figure have largely been overdetermined by minoritizing forces, which is to say that the refugee has been understood as a consequence of United States military intervention, and the queer figure has been understood as a corrupting, infectious monster. These identities themselves are not inherently challenging to the dominant mode of history, in which the heterosexual white male imposes his will on the world and contains these racial and sexual others in their categorical confines. However, it is in the mobilization of these identities in tandem that the works of Mimi Thi Nguyen, Hanh Thi Pham, Nguyen Tan Hoang, and Viet Le endeavor towards truth's undoing.

These artists and creators utilize convolutions of pop-cultural signs and signifiers, looking towards their respective stars, divas, and outlaws to embody an aesthetic of affect, rather than straightforward auto-ethnography. Mimi Thi Nguyen's 1997 zine *evolution of a race riot* weaponizes Hanh Thi Pham's unflinching self portrait, *Misbegotten No More* (1991-2) as the

publication's cover. This serves Nguyen not as an academic citation of queer Vietnamese women, but rather as a borrowing of Pham's affective power recontextualized as a de-individualized punk feminist icon. This mobilized Pham's rejection of gender and the state from the fine art sphere into the subcultural networks of D.I.Y. punk publication, where her iconography as a racial, gendered, and sexual outlaw was virally popular. Nguyen Tan Hoang's auto-ethnographic documentary *PIRATED* (2000) on VHS tells the story of his departure from Vietnam at the age of 7, getting attacked by Thai Pirates, and ultimately saved by German Sailors. The film rips clips and music from the popular Vietnamese American *direct-to-video* variety show *Paris By Night*, and intermingles it with pirated footage of *The Crimson Pirate*, *Querelle*, and his own self-made gay Asian pornography to make the trauma-porn of his narrative all the more erotic, and as a result, unbelievable. Finally, Viet Le's photo series *boy bang/gang band* (2008) and his self-made music video *loveBANG!* (2008) explore the viral modes of popular media in the context of a post-*Đổi Mới*, or liberalized Vietnam. *Boy bang* specifically flirts with the repressed desire of the Vietnamese state and local audiences for metrosexual cosmopolitan Asian boy band masculinities. *loveBANG!* is a saccharine pop cultural spectacle through which its audience is invited to be distracted from traumatic Southeast Asian histories of Cold War conflict, interrupted development, and state censorship which nonetheless haunt the video's backdrop.

Though each of these artists are also active academics whose scholarly work otherwise builds histories of Southeast Asian, queer, and diaspora subjects, it is in their artistic work that queerness works beyond the gaps in the archive to produce pleasurable fantasies wherein history might be contested, rewritten, or forgotten.



## Introduction: Infectious/Affective Queer Methods

“Oh my god. Thank you. Gee! Oh I love the way you walk babe... Xin cảm ơn những đóa hồng vàng thật đẹp, thật quý phái và thật là hoàng tộc riêng tặng cho Tuan Anh. I love you forever.” — Tuan Anh

“Should there ever have been such a person, we most likely would have ended up with the same thing; Nothing, Emptiness, an emptiness so vivid, so intrusive so as to be virtually invisible in the real world.” — Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung

The singer Tuan Anh, having blown multiple kisses to his crowd of adoring fans at a live performance, gave this spontaneous message of gratitude to an unknown fan who handed him a bouquet of yellow flowers.<sup>1</sup> This sentimental moment is forever immortalized as an embedded YouTube video in the *Asian Prince KnowYourMeme* article, which archives the briefly lived internet persona, “Wo Hen Nankan” (Mandarin for “I am Very Ugly”) AKA The Asian Prince. This persona was born on a now defunct geocities page as an internet hoax. The anonymous author writes on the front page, “Hi ladies, my name is Wo-Hen Nankan. Welcome to my site. I am searching for a girlfriend. The picture on the left is me.”<sup>2</sup> Tuan has been described as a Vietnamese Little Richard or Boy George,<sup>3</sup> attributable to his glam-rock aesthetic and the fact that he is basically in drag for all of his performances. Dripping with glittering jewels and caked with brow liner, blush, and lipstick, Tuan Anh’s 80s inspired glamor was again reinterpreted through the racist and homophobic lens of 90s and 2000s internet denizens disgusted and amused by all things disco and queer. Tuan Anh’s gender performance and its backlash within internet culture reflect its subversive citation of signs and signifiers. Judith Butler’s musings on the performativity of gender and sexuality locates the sites of queer resistance to normativity as lying

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<sup>1</sup> harrisonfong, “Tuan Anh Flowers,” YouTube video, 0:38, June 20, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pA7aqFWpUo>.

<sup>2</sup> *Know Your Meme* “Asian Prince,” last modified c.2020, [https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/asian-prince?\\_escaped\\_fragment\\_=%3Dknowyourmeme.com-%23fnr8&page=11839](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/asian-prince?_escaped_fragment_=%3Dknowyourmeme.com-%23fnr8&page=11839).

<sup>3</sup> Du Từ Lê, “Tiếng hát Tuấn Anh, hiện tượng Boy George Việt,” in *Nguoi Viet*, February 20, 2015, <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/van-hoc-nghe-thuat/Tieng-hat-Tuan-Anh-hien-tuong-Boy-George-Viet-0306/>.



Thi Nguyen, Hanh Thi Pham, Nguyen Tan Hoang, and Viet Le endeavor towards truth's undoing. These artists and creators utilize convolutions of pop-cultural signs and signifiers, looking towards their respective stars, divas, and outlaws to embody an aesthetic of affect, rather than straightforward auto-ethnography.

Mimi Thi Nguyen's zine, *evolution of a race riot* (1997) presents what she would later call a *minor object*, a D.I.Y. publication produced by minoritized editors (women, punks, and people of color), and by hand through diffuse, interpersonal networks to mobilize collective racial consciousness. Nguyen Tan Hoang produces the film *PIRATED!* (2000), a VHS appropriation of VietnameseDiaspora popular media, blurred with Hollywood and cult-classic pirate films and self-made pornography, as an illicit undoing of his own personal auto-ethnographical diaspora narrative. Finally, Viet Le fabricates a V-Pop celebrity identity with his poster series *boy bang/gang band* (2008) and his self-made YouTube music video *loveBANG!* (2012), interweaving complex pop-cultural references, actors, and singers from America, Vietnam, and Cambodia to transform tragic diasporic longing into transnational affection. From this selection of queer Vietnamese diaspora artists for whom history has been ruptured, the undoing of stable truths and identities has been crucial for the conceptualization of an irreverent visual politics of artifice, embodied in objects whose circulation and production fall outside of traditional modes of archivism and art encounter.

### **Dissidents and Disidentification: Mobilizing Identity towards a Politics of Revolt**

During her doctoral studies in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, the scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen compiled and published the first issue of what is now one of her most well known zines, *evolution of a race riot* (1997). On the cover is Hanh Thi Pham, holding her flexed bicep which

she brandishes with butch bravado. (Figure 2) The photograph comes from Pham's *Expatriate Consciousness (Khong La Nguoi O)* series, specifically *Misbegotten No More* (1991-2). (Figure 3) Two decades later, Nguyen would characterize the zine as a derivative of 'fanzine,' an accessible and low cost short-form magazine produced as a tool for self expression and community building. Within the zine itself, Nguyen touchingly writes, "Anyway, so this is about doing us for us." Pham's unabashed display of both her Vietnamese and lesbian identities likely struck powerful resonance with Nguyen who described herself as a "Vietnamese refugee dyke." The *race riot* zine is itself a collection of writings and illustrations by irascible women-aligned racial others, punks who despised the whiteness of the punk-scene. These creators articulated not just the personal impacts of racism but the desire for revolt against whiteness, not unlike Pham's own politics of resistance. However, Nguyen's citation of Pham is incomplete, as while she ostensibly utilizes Pham's portrait as a symbol to stand for a queer and feminist anti-racist resistance, she does not mention or credit Pham by name. While this can be understood as a disservice to Pham, Nguyen's forgetfulness can also be construed as similar in practice to Pham herself, expanding beyond the representation of minoritized individuals to mobilize these identities towards collective revolutionary action.

Retracing a history of Nguyen's inspiration, Hanh Thi Pham's own practice largely consisted of composite photography in which she performed the roles of Vietnamese women in the cultural imagination, satirizing incomplete perceptions and cross cultural misunderstandings. In Pham's 1985 photograph, *Reconnaissance*, 1985, she models as a Viet Cong revolutionary opening a door to assassinate a bourgeois American couple (Figure 4). The perspective of the photograph frames the scene like a theatrical stage, affording the viewer a view of the unfolding scene that contrasts Pham lurking from her dark room to the American couple's luxurious parlor.

The third-person perspective takes full advantage of prop placement and juxtaposition, each side serving as mirror images which parody the dreaded femme fatale embodied in a female Viet Cong and the flamboyant and flippant Westerners drinking wine and holding a Mickey Mouse cap. Ho Chi Minh's crooked altar picture mirroring the tiger rug hung askew draws a parallel between the hero-worship of a revolutionary idol and icons of wealth and excess. Hanh Thi Pham employs this dual satirization throughout her photo-series *Along the Street of Knives* in which *Reconnaissance* appears, which articulates mutual misunderstandings of Vietnamese and Americans, highlighting the violent tendencies of both.<sup>7</sup> Elaine Kim writes on Pham's work in her article, "'Bad Women': Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min," in which Kim describes Pham's strategies to provoke both American and Vietnamese communities. Pham's performance of the female Viet Cong pokes fun at the largely anti-communist demographic of the refugee community, a right-wing tendency which she frequently spoke out against from her experiences living in Orange County.<sup>8</sup> The image of Ho Chi Minh in a distorted altar calls into question the legacy of his own efforts towards the abolishment of social and economic classes, which included gendered hierarchy.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha's experimental documentary, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989), also examines this legacy of Vietnamese womanhood. The title of the work refers to the anti-colonial revolutionary Phan Boi Chau's quotation that if a woman were to be asked for her name by a suitor, she should reply "My surname is Viet, given name is Nam." Trinh's work features several interview subjects who recite testimony on the reorientation of women's societal roles during and after the revolution. This testimony was complicated by the fact that the work was not filmed in Vietnam, that the speakers were reading from a script, and that Trinh was

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Kim, "'Bad Women': Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min." *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 3 (1996). 579. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178131>.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

translating ‘their’ words for an English speaking audience. In her text, “Traacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism,” the film scholar Lan Duong outlines a dichotomy of the Traitor and the Hero in Vietnamese Cinema, a flattening of complex subjectivities that demanded the contributions of Vietnamese women to the state.<sup>9</sup> Duong situates Trinh as a traitor-by-translation, contorting and destabilizing words into mistranslated English with fragments of contradictory perspectives, parodying the genre of ethnographic documentary and ultimately denying the audience access to a knowable Vietnamese woman. In a similar and more obvious way to Trinh, Hanh Thi Pham is a multivalent actress who plays into assumptions of the treacherous Vietnamese woman, a potential traitor to both Vietnam and America. North and South Vietnamese would see Pham as treacherous for her parody of Viet Cong iconography, and an American might see themselves threatened by the imminent doom of Pham’s American characters. The theatrical perspective of the photograph is ultimately Pham’s own perspective, understanding each stereotype as incomplete and unstable, a kind of dramatic irony in which she stages the mutual destruction of both.

Shifting from ensemble photography to portraiture, Pham created *Misbegotten No More* to undo fictions of gender and national belonging through the inversion of signs, courting queer and revolutionary desires. Her head is buzzed in a short military style crop with her arms in an “up yours” gesture. She poses in profile, bare chested and flexing her body into a rigid form, Her confidence and stoicism lends her a statuesque character that draws upon the language of visual pleasure centering lesbian desire for butchness gender presentation, and situates this exposure of skin and self as part of America’s undoing, indicated by the inverted image of Buffalo Bill in the background. She faces towards the words, “không là người ở” vertically reversed and seems to

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<sup>9</sup> Lan Duong, “Traacherous Subjects : Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism.” Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. Accessed May 14, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

graphically occupy the same visual plane as her as if to label or categorize herself. As this term translates roughly to “nonresident,” Elaine Kim helpfully points out that Pham was drawing upon the double meaning of “người ở” as both “resident” and “servant” and intended *Misbegotten* as a message to America that she would not be its citizen, which is to be its servant.<sup>10</sup> However, to a white American audience, the text could easily be misread as “o iougn al gnohk” which is completely meaningless to English speakers who were unlikely to understand Vietnamese to begin with. This presents a challenge of signs and symbols, similar to her roleplay in *Reconnaissance* and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s frustration of the ethnographic gaze. Her politics of centering lesbian desires and Vietnamese agency are more evident in this portrait, as she forces an American voyeur to literally invert their world view and learn a new language to really get the message.

Pham’s potent gender-nonconforming self portrait and Mimi Nguyen’s zine appropriation of *Misbegotten* display an unspoken intimacy of politics of withheld information. Nguyen crops *Misbegotten* without its associated “nonresident” sign, offering just Pham herself as the cover for *evolution of a race riot*. The monochromatic reproduction is rather poor in quality, symptomatic of the process of creating zines, in which a person photocopies appropriated or self-made images onto a xerox machine. This method is the most accessible, and has lent a handmade or D.I.Y. aesthetic that contributes to its democratizing aspects; a zine is made by means that anyone could acquire and can be produced cheaply in high volume. The photocopy process involved in zine creation necessarily simplifies photographs, as Pham’s *Misbegotten* is reduced to stark black and white values that contrast the paleness of her chest, face, and arms against a blank background. It would be difficult to argue that this poor reproduction and its exclusion of key elements of the original indicated a lack of appreciation for Pham’s work on Nguyen’s part, but rather

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Kim, “Bad Women,” 582.

symptomatic of a genre of object creation that eschews clarity and quality for polemical content. While Pham's original *Misbegotten No More* rejects assimilation through body language and challenges to legibility, Nguyen's appropriation of the image mobilizes Pham's punk sentiment as a nameless dissident archetype.

Nguyen's written introduction for *evolution of a race riot* describes an aversion to a white zine editor calling for "submissions" from women writers of color, a gesture of liberal inclusion politics that Nguyen identifies as a failed attempt by white punks to absolve an uneasiness with racial privilege. In response, Nguyen compiled *race riot* as a serendipitous collaboration of queer punks-of-color disillusioned with promises of belonging to a predominantly white subculture, presenting an incoherent collection of voices united only in their resistance to minoritization. The scholar Jose Esteban Munoz's crucial text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*,<sup>11</sup> theorizes the act of disidentification, or the wilful (mis)appropriation of signs, symbols, and their associated powers as a queer creative act. Munoz writes, "Disidentification, for the minority subject, is a mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy." This quote constitutes Munoz's argument that the Black pop-artist Jean-Michel Basquiat's appropriation of symbols representing popular comic book superheroes co-opted their powerful whiteness and masculinity into a restructured visual politics of anti-racism. Applying this theory of disidentification to the work of Nguyen and her collaborators, their political performance appropriates the power of the zine genre and its aesthetics from the predominantly white D.I.Y. punk scene, namely an aesthetics of "irony, satire, and contradiction."<sup>12</sup> In *evolution of a race*

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<sup>11</sup> Jose Esteban Munoz, "Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics," University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Introduction," *evolution of a race riot*, 1997, 7.  
<https://issuu.com/poczineproject/docs/evolution-of-a-race-riot-issue-1>.



*riot*, Punk's anti-authoritarian stance is turned against the unchecked authority of whiteness within, utilizing Pham's self portrait to visualize a queer and Asian punk resistance.

Nguyen writes for the *Radical History Review*'s second themed issue, *Queering Archives: Intimate Teachings*, a retrospective grappling with the zine medium's radical beginnings as ephemeral disruptions and her ambivalence towards the zine's entrance into university archives.<sup>13</sup>

Nguyen's conceptualization of zines as *minor objects* attempts to revitalize the values of their unpredictability of encounter, aesthetics of inconsistency, and resistance to capture, as she writes,

I could not then have anticipated how a copy of a copy of a copy [of *race riot*] belonging to a sister of an older brother's best friend might find its way into the hands of a young punk, ten or twenty years later and create connection through the chance encounter.<sup>14</sup>

Nguyen upholds the significance of this chance encounter as the zine genre's power to produce communities outside of the archive. Through this diffuse network of distribution, or perhaps viral vectors of ideological infection, Nguyen proposes the potential for the *minor object* to pose *minor threats*, developing subcultural political consciousnesses that inspire revolution outside of the academy. With this retrospective conviction in mind, Pham's anonymity prevents a privileging of her status as a fine artist, but upholds a radical politics of disruption to coherent narratives that would neutralize a queer Vietnamese womanhood. Ultimately, what remains of Pham in the work of Mimi Nguyen is not an individualized identity but her provocative exhibitionism.

### **Counterfeit Identities: Disidentification on VHS**

Nguyen Tan Hoang fabricates and pirates refugee histories with diaspora camp. Nguyen's short film *PIRATED!* (2000) is an erotic pop cultural retelling of his traumatizing displacement,

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<sup>13</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Minor threats." *Radical History Review*, 2015(122), 11-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849495>.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* 11-12.

rife with lapses in credibility. The film begins with Nguyen’s personal account of leaving Vietnam in 1978 and the Anglo-American singer Dalena’s bilingual English and Vietnamese rendition of *Biển Nhớ*, a mournful mainstay for Vietnamese American refugees which became an anthem for the loss of their homeland. Nguyen’s inclusion of this cover as the background music for his refugee narrative subtly questions the authenticity of sentimental performance, which Dalena sweetly sings,

When tomorrow comes	Ngày mai em đi
And you will say goodbye	Biển nhớ tên em gọi về
The sea and I will cry	Gọi hồn liễu rũ lê thê
The trees will sway and sigh <sup>15</sup>	Gọi bờ cát trắng đêm khuya <sup>16</sup>

As journalist Le Thuan writes for the *Los Angeles Times*, “Dalena’s ancestors are Scotch-Irish.

Her hair is blond, her eyes blue. She was born in Indiana and grew up in Florida—a long way from Southeast Asia.”<sup>17</sup> Dalena’s rise to fame as the Anglo-American Vietnamese pop sensation delights in her anomaly and novelty, as her talent for pronouncing phrases in dozens of non-English languages transferred towards a career singing covers of popular Vietnamese music. Her many Vietnamese fans approached her impressive fluency with bemused curiosity, a talent for performing Vietnamese lyrics made more ironic by the fact she does not understand the language. It is important that in this cover Dalena sings in both English and Vietnamese, a doubling of performance that adapts the song to the ears of both mono and bilingual communities. The distinction in these versions is that translation itself necessarily has gaps in meaning and a traitorous character in the Vietnamese context. Perhaps in a similar way that Mimi Thi Nguyen cites Hanh Thi Pham, Dalena is a star whose queer lapses in the “authentic” positions her perfectly as Nguyen Tan Hoang’s idol. Nguyen’s clipping of Dalena singing in a

<sup>15</sup> Dalena-Topic, “Biển nhớ,” Youtube video, 5:42, May 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YfBL6lyWCJ>.

<sup>16</sup> Trịnh Công Sơn, lyrics for “Biển Nhớ,” Genius, <https://genius.com/Trinh-cong-son-bien-nho-lyrics>.

<sup>17</sup> Thuan Le, “Vietnamese Soul Singer : Blond Dalena Croons Like a Native--Almost,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-03-14-me-945-story.html>.

purple *áo dài*, what is considered the national dress of Vietnam, attends her celebrity and cultural cross dressing anomaly. While many discussions of cultural-cross dressing focuses on cultural appropriation as a strategy through which white subjects loot from minoritized cultures as an enterprising economic competitor, Nguyen's obsession with Dalena presents a kind of reciprocal relationship of cross-cultural performance that allowed Vietnamese spectators to enjoy the exotic novelty of a white woman singing in their own language. The heart of this spectacle does not necessarily lie in Dalena literally becoming Vietnamese, but the pleasure in performing Vietnameseness.

However, Nguyen critically engages this pleasure in Vietnameseness, juxtaposing a tragic refugee narrative that constitutes a kind of trauma-porn, and a more obviously erotic fantasy. The opening text sets up Nguyen's exposition, where he recounts fleeing the country at the age of seven by boat. Along the way he is attacked by Thai pirates, but saved by German sailors. The footage begins with a montage of pastoral scenes ripped from the Vietnamese American variety show *Paris By Night*, depicting farmers driving ox carts across dirt roads and a boy sleeping in a hammock. A voiceover which Nguyen borrows from a PBS documentary on Vietnamese American repatriates presents the first branch of the narrative, "As I stood in the land of my ancestors, I was overcome with joy and a sense of belonging." This, along with the pastoral clips, is a gushingly sentimental spectacle that delights in its tragedy.

Following the establishment of Orange County, California's Little Saigon as a Vietnamese ethnic enclave, the Vietnamese American community saw rapid developments in multimedia creation, capital accumulation, and community formation which created the necessary conditions for *Paris By Night* to emerge. The scholar Nhi T. Lieu emphasizes the normative role the show played in its projections and formation of a constantly shifting

Vietnamese American identity.<sup>18</sup> *Paris by Night* grappled with the attractively tragic figure of the “boat person” in the imaginary of an American public eager to have a brown person to save, as well as their desire to replace this image with the economically successful and lavish Vietnamese American elite. While these visual politics were ostensibly for the entertainment of Vietnamese Americans, the PBS audio segments reflect efforts made by the state to represent Vietnamese to Americans. Both of these endeavor to display experiential and emotional truths, truths that Nguyen situates himself outside of. The act of piracy itself, stealing and counterfeiting footage, circumvents the spectacle of the live broadcast and the VHS purchase, and as the film “accidentally” records a commercial for karaoke equipment, the fictions of spectacle begin to come into question.

After this brief commercial break, Nguyen rewrites the homecoming story: “At long last/I too found myself/Not among the rice paddies of my ancestors/But on the High Seas: In the arms of Pirates and under the bodies of Sailors.” This divergence is followed by shots from the films *The Crimson Pirate* (1952) and *Querelle* (1982), meshing interchangeably the PG comedy-adventure flick with an explicitly homoerotic one. Sexy bare-chested sea-men swing from ropes; flesh, muscle, and slick sweat fly across the frame and suddenly Nguyen Tan Hoang himself is getting spanked in a sailor uniform by “Thai” pirates. (Figure 5) Nguyen’s own home-made pornographic clips begin to cut in and out of the pirated material, animating the fantasy as voyeuristic shots of professional actors give way to the amateurs, now much more amorous. In a cramped bedroom, with unconvincing costumes, and an immersion breaking disco balls snuck into the background, Nguyen and friends stage heated scenes of passion and desire. The scene of a sailor Nguyen getting spanked by pirates recalls clips of Dalena, who herself was

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<sup>18</sup> Nhi T. Lieu, “Performing Culture in Diaspora: Assimilation and Hybridity in *Paris by Night Videos* and Vietnamese American Niche Media,” in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Duke University Press, 2017), 215.

popularized by *Paris By Night*, wearing a purple *áo dài* and miming the mournful songs of the Vietnamese; both are skillful borrowers, adopting the costume and performing as the other in acts of homage.

Nguyen's citation of *Querelle* attends to a familiarity with the "gay film fandom." The bisexual German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder holds a cult following for his edgy and voyeuristic films that tease at the limits of desire, but most importantly center homo-erotic visual pleasure. Fassbinder worshiped working class masculinities (notably sailors) in his filmography, a privileged gaze that reflected his bourgeoisie background. Nguyen's citation of his fetishistic gaze is juxtaposed with his homemade gay Asian re-enactment. Nguyen's collaborators Dredge Kang and Sammy Chuang play the Thai pirates mercilessly doling out Nguyen's punishment, while the German sailors only embrace each other. Of the many disjointed segments and pirated clips, the separation of Nguyen's own film production between the white men and Asian men speaks most clearly to Nguyen's sensitivity to his positionality as a racialized queer subject. Nguyen notably only submits to his Asian captors, possibly avoiding a tired trope of interracial sexual dynamics that necessitate white domination and Asian submission. Untangling the problematics of this misremembering, Mimi Thi Nguyen writes, "These condensed citations from cinematic fictions do double labor in a fashion to the earlier set of agrarian images, rearticulating memories and producing other desires in the gaps."<sup>19</sup> The 'Thai' pirates' sadomasochistic acts turn trauma into fantasy, a reconciliation of sorts with psychic wounds ironically through the creation of physical wounds, a masochistic remedy not unlike the trauma-porn produced by other Vietnamese Americans. This inversion of trauma and lapses in memory constitute a confusion of signifiers, as Nguyen's actual experience getting attacked by

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<sup>19</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, "In the arms of Pirates, Under the Bodies of Sailors": Diaspora, Desire, and Danger in Nguyen Tan Hoang's *PIRATED!*," in *Charlie Don't Surf!: 4 Vietnamese American artists*, (Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2005), 71.

Thai pirates as a child is queered; this new attack produces in him an intermingled sense of pain, pleasure, and ecstasy that decenters the visual pleasure of white viewers watching both pornography and ethnography.

Expanding to a spatial analysis of audienceship, *PIRATED!*'s original Video Home System (VHS) format lends itself to viewing on the home television. *Paris By Night* and PBS are family programs that pedagogically function to instruct and inform a coherent Vietnamese identity, and crucially *Paris By Night* is a *direct-to-video* series that was purchased and pirated on VHS.<sup>20</sup> Nguyen Tan Hoang's more illicit footage reflects the proliferation of pornographic films that enjoyed the same consumeristic boom as family friendly television, which also served as a pedagogical form to instruct a coherent white gay identity with the exception of niche Asian fetish content. These both serve as pedagogies and pornographies of identity, and in appealing to visual, sentimental, and corporeal pleasure, function normatively. Reading the erotic content of both, John Champagne's polemical text, "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography," warns against a purely textual close reading of any pornographic content. Forwarding a geographical analysis of material 'gay' spaces, Champagne construes the gay porno-arcade against the family living room. Champagne argues that outside of the prying eyes of family members, the gay porn viewer inhabits the spectator space of the arcade that precariously embodies a private space for viewership, though at times lacked any privacy at all. To seek this privacy necessarily implies a taboo spectatorship, which is to say there are very few safe places to watch Nguyen's *PIRATED!*. Nguyen's film is far too cerebral for a voyeur only interested in its sexual content, and it is far too sexual to be a purely academic exercise.

This film's placeless orientation is well suited for its thematic questioning of belonging for Vietnamese diaspora, functioning less as a purely gay film and instead inhabits a critically

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<sup>20</sup> Lieu, "Performing Culture in the Diaspora," 214.

queer non-place. Miriam Lam uses the term *chrononormativity* to describe a normative function of historicization that she argues Southeast Asian American studies fall prey to, whereby “time [organizes] individual human bodies towards maximum productivity... people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time.”<sup>21</sup> This concept of *chrononormativity* expands on the idea that queer people in both history and in the course of their lives experience the passage of time differently from the heterosexual mainstream.

Lam ultimately argues that the erratic and nonlinear plot of *PIRATED!* contests a chrononormativity that would furnish an authentic historical account that might capture queer Vietnamese diaspora. In the same way that *PIRATED!* lacks any place in a historical archive, its genre-bending subject matter additionally bars it from any truly comfortable viewing situation. As such, the film’s proper time and place, as does Nguyen and his audience’s proper time and place, lies outside of a cleanly segregated and discursive reality. That there is no “right” condition for audienceship constitutes a success of Nguyen’s queer methods, which have mangled and mashed all recognizable signifiers of identity that normative categories of gay, straight, Vietnamese, or white cannot accommodate in space or time.

Lam’s analysis synthesizes theories of queer temporality and Southeast Asian temporalities. Lam argues Nguyen Tan Hoang’s work provokes transnational and transhistorical futures as a queer Southeast Asian man whose personal history as a refugee has been an otherwise overdetermining identity in Asian American scholarship. Lam’s chapter builds upon the scholarship of Elizabeth Freeman, whose analysis on Nguyen’s short film, *K.I.P.* (2000) focuses on the artist’s temporal displacement to spectate an unreachable history. *K.I.P.* features a

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<sup>21</sup> Miriam Lam, “Queering Time: Queering temporality in Asian American Visual Cultures,” *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe (University of Washington Press, 2017), 61.

series of actor Kip Noll's 'best' gay porn scenes from the 60s and 70s, intermittently flashing to shots of Nguyen's face, his jaw dropped in an entranced focus on the actors. Freeman notes the fantastical nature of Nguyen's spectatorship, "Too young, too racialized, too 'foreign'... [he] could not have literally joined the pre-AIDS white urban gay male scene for which *Kip Noll, Superstar* is a metonym."<sup>22</sup> Freeman construes the crew of this original production as locked within its time, history constructing an impassable barrier of racial exclusion and mass death at the hands of AID, conditions that Nguyen can only performatively reverse through filmic necromancy. Lam takes *K.I.P.*'s anachronisms more generatively,

What if they, Kip Noll's queer temporal crew, instead joined Nguyen's gawking spectator in 2002? ... What if the open-mouthed spectator's masturbatory subjective desire is for Kip Noll to instead join this young diasporic Vietnamese gay man in rickety refugee fishing boats ... with Asian American techies in Silicon Valley, in gay Los Angeles Asian American art scenes, in transnational cosmopolitan Vietnam?<sup>23</sup>

This is only a fragment of a series of speculative rhetorical questionings in which Lam challenges Americanist and Asian Americanist critiques of Nguyen as solely a cultural invader or interventionist into the heterosexual or homosexual mainstream. It is evident Nguyen intervenes in that as he plays upon fictions of himself, at once alien through his racialization, and as well corrupting through his queerness. However, Lam asserts that for Nguyen's work, the economy of desire and fantasy hold potentials for identifications that picture all of these things and more as rich with seductive potentials that crucially include Asian desire and desirability.

### **Transnational Affections: Celebrity Crushes of a Transnational Diaspora**

Viet Le's photo series, playfully titled *boy bang/gang band* (2008), appropriates the strategies of masculine signification used by Asian boy bands and expands on an artifice of

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<sup>22</sup> Miriam Lam, "Queering Time," 60.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*



identity, queerness, and fantasy to explore transnational desires. The photographs titled *Viet Q (platinum)* (2008) (Figure 6) and *woof* (2008) (Figure 7.) are set in a placeless white backdrop, reminiscent of the Backstreet Boys' *Millennium* album cover in which the Boys are dressed in matching white suits, displaced in a glossy shining void. Lê's *Viet Q*, a fictitious boyband, is a fake product manufactured from the blueprints of globalized Asian masculinities. The members of Lê's boy band are aggressive, submissive, intimate, and standoffish as the group is pictured in various ensembles roleplaying as celebrities teasing at a homoerotic subtext. The name *Viet Q* is a pun on the term *Việt Kiều*, the term used by those living in Vietnam for the overseas community. This series draws upon these globalized identifications as a navigation of desire, both a desire for the cosmopolitan transnational celebrity, as well as the desires of the transnational subject.

Viet Lê's observations on the globalization of Asian Pop music, or rather the heterogenous Asian Pops, while working in Southeast Asia, serve as his inspiration for the work as *Viet Q*. Lê writes, "Solo acts and boy bands such as Jay Chou, Fahrenheit, Rain, Super Junior have legions of local and international fans, ranging from screaming teeny boppers to desperate housewives and queer eyes for these (questionably) straight guys."<sup>24</sup> Lê cites both Taiwanese and South Korean groups and artists, but by far the most academically discussed group is the K-Pop boy band. Korean male idol groups adapted masculinity to suit the desires of an audience tantalized by a subversive, yet upwardly mobile and metropolitan pseudo-gayness termed "metrosexual." One does not need to be "authentically gay" to be metrosexual, but instead describes a performative practice of borrowing heavily from what media historian Sun Jung describes as a middle and upper middle class aesthetic of the gay global consumer. Fit,

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<sup>24</sup> "Việt Lê: 'boy bang' at Java Gallery in Phnom Penh," *diaCRITICS*, Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, Oct 21, 2010, <https://dvan.org/2010/10/vi%E1%BB%87t-le-boy-bang-at-java-gallery-in-phnom-penh/>.

fashionable, and rich enough to travel, these (questionably) straight cultural interlocutors adopt a kind of star status similar to the trans-national masculinities of K-Pop groups. For Sun Jung, the hard, muscled body of the Korean celebrity and his softer side form the ideal of a soft masculinity that trafficked international fan desires, primarily from women.

Vietnamese Diaspora subjects or *Việt Kiều* are uncanny presences that are received in the homeland as both subversive and desirable. Vietnam's liberalizing Đổi Mới economic reforms instituted in 1980s were crucial developments in the nation's cultural globalism, as party leaders were required to transition from a reliance on the Soviet Union to a global market economy in light of economic crises and the collapse of their greatest ally. What was once an officially isolationist national culture with a black market on overseas music, became a legally sanctioned society of avid consumers for a common yet heterogeneous trans-national pop culture that desires not only Vietnamese stars, but Korean, Japanese, and Singaporean pop stars as well. The Vietnamese government loosened restrictions to embrace its diaspora in particular with an amendment to their dual-citizenship ban in 2009, which approved dual-citizenship exclusively for refugees, expatriates, and their foreign-born children as an invitation to contribute to the national economy.<sup>25</sup> This globalized condition is the focus of Le's *boy bang/gang band*, whose glossy advertisements take after aesthetics of the celebrity pop sensation to characterize the body of the Vietnamese diaspora as an object of repressed desire.

Film scholar Lan Duong takes the male body of the Vietnamese diaspora celebrity in Vietnam as an attractive and commodifiable sign. Duong uses the stardom of Johnny Tri Nguyen as an emblem for trans-national audiences of modernity and mobility, depending on the performance and experience of his attractive body. Nguyen's literal displacement as a member of

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<sup>25</sup> Viet Le, "Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Ho Chi Minh City," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly, Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012, 102.

the diaspora ignites the imagination as to his multiculturalism, economic status, and embodiment of modernity. Le's decision to name the band after *Việt Kiều* plays upon the "kind of cosmopolitanism assumed to be a part of the diaspora."<sup>26</sup> Le expands upon this characterization in his scholarly work on *Việt Kiều* artists in Vietnam, writing, "First rejected as traitors and then embraced by the government, *Việt Kiều* embody the uncanny aspects of repression and return."<sup>27</sup> Le and Duong's observations on local projections of the *Việt Kiều* identity as inextricably tied with images of stardom, wealth, and success contextualize his fictionalized boy band as a parody of this real and imagined celebrity status as an object of both desire and suspicion.

Viet Le's interest in consumer desire is reflected in his photographic fabrication of *Viet Q*, not just queering a normative pop-cultural performance of masculinity in the case of *Viet Q (platinum)* or *woof!*, but rather invites a disidentifying fandom response to the metrosexuality of male idols. Kristina Busse writes on fan-fiction typically authored by American female fans known as "slashers."<sup>28</sup> The act of slashing, or to write slash fiction, narrates the imagined secret gay lives of beloved boy bands, an adaptation of the self-insert narrative in which female fans imagine themselves in relationships with celebrities. Significantly, many slashers are women, and their fantasies typically delight in themes of forbidden love and vulnerability that arise from imagined gay relationships between male stars. The genre of *yaoi* (やおい)<sup>29</sup> has developed more specifically in the pan-Asian context, though its origins are in Japanese subculture, it has developed communities of fan creators in Vietnam, Korea, China and America. Focusing on the

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<sup>26</sup> Lan Duong, "Betraying Feminine Virtue: Collaborative Effects and the Transnational Circuits of Vietnamese Popular Culture," *Treacherous Subjects: gender, culture, and trans-Vietnamese feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. 172.

<sup>27</sup> Viet Le, "Many Returns," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, 2012, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Kristina Busse, "'I'm Jealous of the Fake Me': Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction." In *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 41–56. University of Iowa Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q22s2.5>.

<sup>29</sup> Jungmin Kwon. "Girl Fans Queered." In *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies*, 31–62. University of Iowa Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvdtph5.5>.

productive capacity of fans, these slash fictions or yaoi works are deeply invested in the signs and signification of the body, particularly the body of the star as it relates to the reader/fan/author. These fantasies mobilize the body of the star to achieve various desires, often to embody the position of maleness to imagine relationships without sexual disparity between men and women. Though these fan creators have often been characterized as heterosexual women, they employ a subversively disidentifying process reminiscent of Mimi Thi Nguyen's *evolution of a race riot*, in which fans construct alternative realities of queer desire out of (questionably) straight idol performances of masculinity.

Drawing upon a common desire for Asian masculinity, Le misdirects heterogenous spectators, the straight women, the yaoi enthusiasts, and the gay men, into an imaginary space of reckoning. Lê's poster *white magique!* 2008 (Figure 8) advertises a live performance of Viet Q, hiding a small vignette of the Viet Q members having an orgy. The poster is kitsch in graphic-design, making use of simple lavender polka dots and rays radiating from the central vignette of Viet Q orbited by "White Magique" and "live the dream" in frilly cursive font. A second vignette is a scaled down copy of *Viet Q (platinum)* and the third is the aforementioned orgy. Lê makes these connections consciously, as he writes "Gay Asian porn magazines and DVD covers have aped the look of boy band CD covers and posters, redefining the term heart throb."<sup>30</sup> While Le does not cite any examples, *Viet Q*'s own mimics seem to furnish some evidence for this analysis. The look of the poster is otherwise unassuming, and the faded orgy vignette is small enough to miss. This conflation of signs mismatches a live "one night only" performance with prerecorded pornography, effectively confusing whatever this poster is supposed to advertise. Recalling Champagne's advancement of spatial consideration in the analysis of pornographic encounter, it is unclear where this poster wants you to go or what it

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

wants you to do. The logical corporal spaces would be the concert venue and the porno shop, two entirely disparate spaces of media encounters. Adhering only to the logic of desire Viet Le directs his audience to imagine a place where the erotic worlds of the housewife and the queer eye have collapsed into each other. No address, no price tag, just a placeless non-event. This image is the only poster depicting sex acts in *boy bang/gang band*, and it puts a kind of end to the visual foreplay of the other posters, a hint at the consummation of desire that functions more as a strange hoax.

Band posters exist simultaneously as advertisements of the band and of their fans, simultaneously precious due to the fragility of paper and ubiquitous for their reproducibility. Viet Le's queer fandom, whether it is for acts such as Jay Chou or Rain, produces the fictitious boy band as a simulacra of these desirable Asian masculinities, lacking a precise "original" model. This is reinforced by the installation views, which group multiple copies of each poster on gallery walls. The Vietnamese Diaspora, or *Việt Kiều*, identity is one consistently under question and renegotiation as to an authentic Vietnamese-ness. The nagging questions of authenticity have plagued the Asian American identity from contentious issues of food to assumed ties or severances with the homeland. Viet Le's observations on his own orientation to the local population of Vietnam while living and working there parse a similar foreignness as to the *Việt Kiều* identity. This diasporic ambivalence, epitomized in his writing, "to return to one's homeland does not mean returning home," recontextualizes his multiple iterations and copies of *Viet Q* posters. The band, as a simulacra of identity, exists purely as incoherent signs. This playfully deflects questions of Viet Kieu authenticity, playing into stereotypes of glamor and success in the diaspora while also alluding to the hollowness of these perceptions.

While *boy bang/gang band* represented an early and inspirational phase in Viet Le's artistic production, Le would later go all-in to the aesthetics and musicality of trans-national pop with his original 2012 music video, *love BANG!*,<sup>31</sup> which he describes as a sexperimental time-traveling transgender love triangle sung in Vietnamese, English, and Khmer. The music video opens with a sample of Thanh Lanh's iconic French-Vietnamese cover of Cher's *Bang Bang* (1966), as three lip syncing transgender drag queens in shimmering *áo dài* slowly raise plastic green guns à la *Charlie's Angels*. (Figure 9) As the beat picks up, the girls undergo a dramatic costume change into 2000s club wear as Cambodian rapper RJ delivers several bars in Khmer, the camera zooming dizzily in and out of his face. The English chorus is accompanied by shots of retro-futuristic fashion models strolling through the brick halls of an unfinished Cambodian modernist building. This music video is a confluence of histories wherein the traumatic histories of the Vietnam and Cambodian wars give way to dance, dazzling lights, and sublime concrete ruins. The narrative of the music video is intentionally disjunctured, compiling past and future in ways that confuse and confound relevant histories similar to Nguyen Tan Hoang's *PIRATED!*, but adapted 12 years later to the viral format of the Youtube music video, and recontextualizing the dream of a national 'homecoming' as a potential reality furnished by a freshly globalized Vietnam.

Viet Le teases at fascinating histories which interweave the video's production and its clustering of references, without explicitly detailing these histories to his viewers. In an interview with the scholar Laura Kina, Le points out his intentional punning of *Charlie's Angels* with the U.S. military term "Charlie," for Viet Cong militia,<sup>32</sup> a nod to the lingering

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<sup>31</sup> Viet Le, *LOVE BANG! VIỆT LÊ'S SEXperimental MV (Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Nicks, Nancy Sinatra, Khanh Ly)*, YouTube video, 5:32, June 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OSgRuFnbGM>.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Kina, "Promiscuous Time Traveling (on Leaving and Returns): A Conversation with Lin+Lam and Viet Le," *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, University of Washington Press, 2017. 71.

militarization of the Vietnamese identity as a potentially subversive or treacherous force. This construction of identity is complicated by the fact that the ‘Vietnamese’ *Charlie’s Angels* are all Cambodian drag queens, a casting decision that reflects his own love for the queer nightclub *Classic Night* in Phnom Penh where queens would regularly perform in Vietnamese, South Asian, or Thai costumes. This tenuous relationship to nationality and the state might be further complicated by the music video’s sampling of Thanh Lanh’s *Bang Bang* cover, which was temporarily banned by the Vietnamese government for its potentially subversive content (its bolero style was a hallmark of the “yellow music” produced by musicians from the anti-communist Southern Republic of Vietnam.) In this interview, Viet Le remarks that this music video is part of his scholarly and curatorial work on the gaps between pop culture and traumatic memory.<sup>33</sup> The music video itself does not do the scholarly work of filling in the gaps, representing erased or unknown histories of which he is likely intimately aware as a scholar of Southeast Asian histories in Cambodia and Vietnam. Le embraces a Southeast Asian queer subjectivity thrown into the disarray of a transnational, diasporic, or globalized modernity. The non-place of a music video is not an opportunity to reflect upon and restore past states, but rather to embrace music, dance, and desire in its unpredictable permutations.

### **Conclusion: A Space of Absence**

It is significant that three artists, excluding Pham, are also active academics. Mimi Thi Nguyen’s scholarship has largely worked in Critical Refugee studies, Nguyen Tan Hoang has pivoted from queer Asian American media studies to queer Vietnamese film, and Viet Le works in Southeast Asian art history and curation. Their own queer art practices happen outside of the academy. These art practices do not write-in or represent any singular authentic account of the

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<sup>33</sup>ibid.

minoritized histories in which they specialize, but rather disidentify from commodifiable identities to form alternative queer non-spaces. The scholar Anjali Arondekar writes in, “For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India,” “The critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates. By this I mean to say: What if the recuperative gesture returns us to a space of absence?”<sup>34</sup> This is not to say the “recuperative gesture” of historical recovery is necessarily counterproductive, as legibility within history offers certain privileges of visibility that too might inevitably lead to a kind of justice in representation. However, Arondekar’s “space of absence” points to a limit that the archive, and by extension the academy has to furnish for a queer Vietnamese diasporic subject a fantasy of belonging that might be more colorfully realized through more promiscuous networks. Recalling Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung’s parody of the *Asian Prince*, Hung’s reflections on the obliterating forces of racism and internet virality might ring melancholic in spite of the web page’s irreverent and joyous aesthetics. There could be a desire to recover the real Tuan Anh from the ruins of an internet hoax, though his fame has largely outlasted his infamy. Hung nonetheless produced a vivid emptiness as vibrant as the flowers Tuan Anh lovingly received on stage, not as a gesture of recuperation but rather an interruption, an intrusion into the logics of racism in the history of the internet. To subdue the historicizing urge in place of the queer urge, that is to say to embrace absence, artifice, or unintelligibility, is precisely the generative site in which these artists endeavor to determine themselves in an indeterminate space and time. In embracing an aesthetic of affect, incoherent as some images may be, these delight in their divas, outlaws, and stars.

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<sup>34</sup> Anjali Arondekar. *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Duke University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11313gb>.



IMAGES



Fig. 1 Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung, *Asian Prince*, 2001, digital media collage and web page

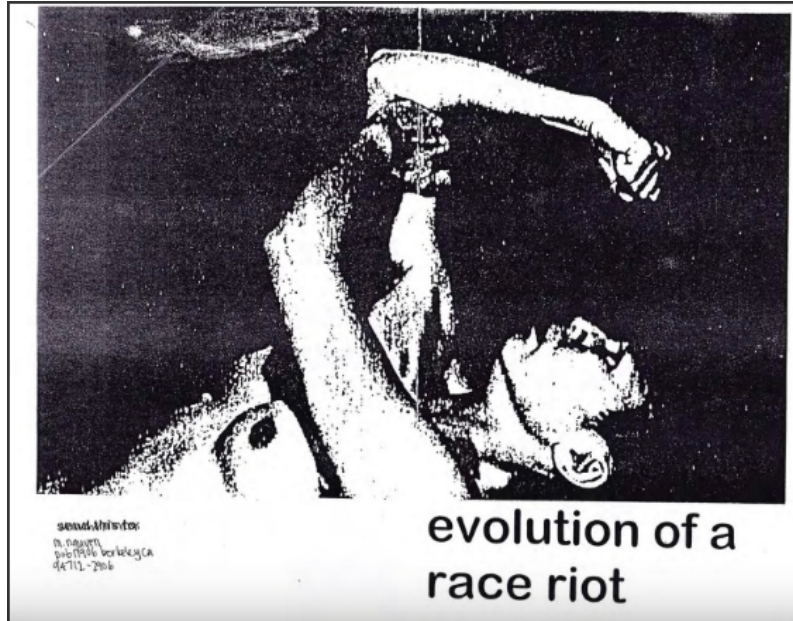


Fig. 2 Cover for *evolution of a race riot* edited and compiled by Mimi Thi Nguyen, 1997, zine

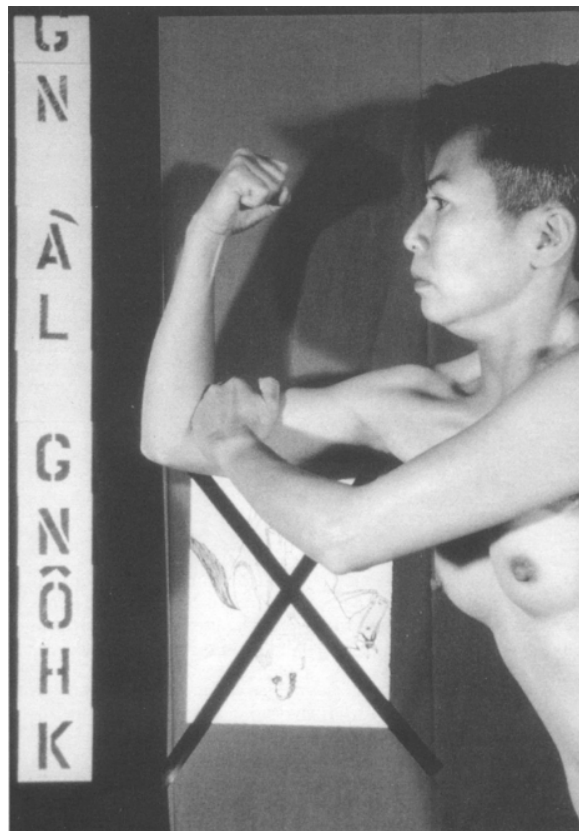


Fig. 3 Hanh Thi Pham, *Misbegotten No More*, c. 1991-2, photograph



Fig. 4 Hanh Thi Pham and Richard Turner, *Reconnaissance*, 1985, multiple exposure photograph





Fig. 5 Nguyen Tan Hoang, Still from *PIRATED!*, 2000



Fig. 6 Viet Le, *Viet Q (platinum)*, 2008, digital chromogenic print



Fig. 7 Viet Le, *woof!*, 2008, digital chromogenic print



Fig. 8 Viet Le, *white magique!*, 2008, chromogenic print





Fig. 9 Viet Le, *Charlie's Angels (of History)*, 2013, Digital C-Print



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