

When the Prison Doors Are Opened, the Real Dragon Will Fly Out

Seeking Alternative Asian / American Futurities

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Abstract

“When the prison doors are opened, the real dragon will fly out.”¹

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Glitch as error; the erroneous element, the perversity to the desirable. The current hegemonic structure disseminates varying images of the Asian as the “other” and imposes expectations of labor and assimilation onto Asians in the United States. Drawing on Vivian Huang’s conception of the Asian/American as “inscrutable” and Rosa Menkman’s framework regarding the glitch², I aim to link the idea of glitch as another means of potential for Asian American futurity to reject assimilationist tactics and Orientalist perceptions of Asian individuals as a whole. How can we refuse the American Dream and reclaim images of the Asian individual?

¹ Asian Information Office. *When the prison doors are opened, the real dragon will fly out!*, ca. 1973. Frankie Ziths Collection (MS 1130). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

² Menkman, R. (2011). *The glitch moment(um)*. Institute of Network Cultures. p. 10. In an expansion on Menkman’s original *Glitch Studies Manifesto* (2010), Menkman presents *The Glitch Moment(um)* wherein she more explicitly defines “the ‘glitch’ as a (actual and/or simulated) break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error.” This definition of glitch allows for a subversion of commodification and social standards.

Similarly, what rituals have Vietnamese diasporic communities maintained from the homeland to cultivate havens separate from the powers of America? The existence of Asian Americans and the continuance of their cultural spaces and practices present themselves as ‘errors’ within the white supremacist state. Both the glitch and the Asian American contradict hegemonic political and aesthetic conventions. How can glitches and Asian Americans reject homogeneity and racialization, and move toward a future of agency and autonomy for the Asian American individual?

Foreword

To begin, I'd like to first quote Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang from *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. Asian American life is not simple nor straightforward, but there exists this truth as explicated by Tuck and Yang:

“The impossibility of fully becoming a white settler - in this case, white referring to an exceptionalized position with assumed rights to invulnerability and legal supremacy - as articulated by minority literature preoccupied with “glass ceilings” and “forever foreign” status and “myth of the model minority”, offers a strong critique of the myth of the democratic nation-state. However, its logical endpoint, the attainment of equal legal and cultural entitlements, is actually an investment in settler colonialism. Indeed, even the ability to be a minority citizen in the settler nation means an option to become a brown settler. For many people of color, becoming a subordinate settler is an option even when becoming white is not.”³

I cannot stress enough that we, as Asian Americans, are settlers in the U.S. imperialist project and it is necessary to clearly recognize our role in perpetuating settler colonialism.

³ Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 18.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and support of my fellow 2nd-year Photo/Media classmate Ali Meyer. Without them, I would not have learned or grown as exponentially in my practice nor have been able to get through the program. I would also like to thank my good friend, Jamelah Jacob, for providing numerous references and texts for my thesis and working late nights with me to hold me accountable. I'd also like to extend my gratitude to Lily Nguyen for talking me through stressful days and deadlines and for the phone calls where we would console each other over our respective projects. I would also like to thank my lifelong friends, Julie Ho and Linda Ngo, who both have consistently supported me throughout the years with any and all of my endeavors. And I also want to show my appreciation for my friends across the world, Daryl Bradley, Nikki Chau, and Morgan Anderson who provided me with much needed distractions from my academic stressors. I'd like to remember my grandfather who passed away in January 2024, Phuoc Van Phan. He was such a significant figure in all of our lives and I cannot thank him enough for raising me, my sister, and my many cousins. Finally, I've reserved the most important acknowledgment for my parents, Michelle Phuong Luong and Minh Quang Phan, and my sister, Paulina Tuyet Phan. They've offered so much time, labor, and unconditional love and support and they are my main motivators for my research and artmaking practice.

Introduction

My research and practice have always centered my family and my community. As I reflect on the works I have made throughout this program, I will continue to focus on the liberatory potentials of art for Asian Americans.

Through a Western lens, Asians and Asian Americans have been depicted as the other, as the laborer, and as the constant peripheral subject expected to serve the white center. In this process of othering, the Asian American is dismissed and consigned to a “life as invisible, silent, impenetrable, flat, distant, and withholding,” capitulating for further control and manipulation under the Western gaze.⁴ Consequently, this illegibility gives way to Orientalist projections of desires for control and dominance, and we, as the Asian subject, act as the screen for said projections. These impositions have been perpetuated since the inception of the American colonial project and the stratagems to disseminate this essentialized image of the Asiatic have adapted in response to the penetration of technology, imagemaking, and media interaction in our day-to-day.

While digital spaces are oft seen as realms for confrontation and resistance, we see these spaces become fraught with consignments of Asians to sole semblances of personhood. These Orientalist perspectives have infected a wide span of new media projects (from contemporary films, to video games, and to social media), and whether or not these narratives are intentionally fabricated and spread, there are material consequences for the lives of Asians across the world.

⁴ Huang, V. L. (2022). *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (1st ed.). Duke University Press, 5.

One very obvious ramification is the ascription of the Asian individual as exploitable and expendable labor. I research and create in response to this phenomenon.

As a child, I was never afforded the opportunity to speak with my parents and understand them as people because they had to conform and subscribe to dominant ideologies assigned to the Asian immigrant. Both of my parents maintained their livelihoods in this country through pink-collar service jobs, working in factories, restaurants, and nail salons. Neither my father nor my mother had any draw to this line of work nor expected the concomitant maleffects on their psychic health. For most of my life, I internalized and upheld notions of Asians as obstructions to personhood. I saw my ancestors as illegible and incomprehensible; I ran along the voids and distances constructed by white assimilationist idealisms. The distance between generations of Asians and Asian Americans is evergrowing as hegemonic systems of soft and hard power inundate us, and while I now have better tools to critique and resist these systems, not everyone is afforded the space and capacity to address these issues.

My thesis contextualizes the works I have made throughout the duration of this program and aims to confront gendered and racialized expectations of labor for Asians in America and how these ideas proliferate via techno-Orientalism. I will also outline certain instances of resistance and survival for Vietnamese Americans, and how we can refuse assimilationist narratives by co-opting Orientalist essentializations of the Asian. Within the voids of illegibility we are exiled to, we can find potentials separate from the Western gaze.

Chapter 1: Saigon Oriental Grocery / Chungking Express

*“The historical circumstances and the specific conditions of the Vietnamese experience molded them into the “good subjects” who embraced not only the ideals of capitalism but also the ideology of self-responsibility espoused during the political climate of the Reagan era.”*⁵

*“Whether depicted as menacing yellow peril or applauded as model minorities, Asian Americans are cast as an economic threat and hyperproductive automatons and hence pathological to the US nation-state.”*⁶

⁵ Lieu, N. T. (2011). *American Dream in Vietnamese*. (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press, 23.

⁶ David L. Eng, & Shinhee Han. (2019). *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Duke University Press, 37.



AMERICAN DREAM: Khai and Dung Luong, center, have provided well for their five children, including Don, left, and Thanh, right, with Chung King Express and two other restaurants.



FAMILY LEGACY: In October, eager entrepreneurs Michelle Luong and her husband, Minh Phan, purchased the Mongolian House in Auburn from her parents, Dung and Khai Luong.

CREATING A RESTAURANT DYNASTY

Hard work and determination have bought Khai Luong and his family a slice of the American dream. Many Asian refugees in Fort Wayne share their story.

By CAROL TANNEHILL
of *The News-Sentinel*

Inside his bustling Chinese restaurant on North Anthony Boulevard, Khai Luong nods toward his 12-year-old son, dressed in a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap and American blue jeans.

He doesn't want him to get into this business, he says.

His last child — the first to be born in America — can do anything he wants. He can go to college. Get a good job. Raise a family. All because of egg rolls and hot tea and hard work.

Luong's family, which owns seven restaurants in the Fort Wayne area, is a major part of Fort Wayne's recent Chinese restaurant boom. Their story of determination, pooled resources and unexpected success mirrors the story of most of the other Chinese restau-

rants in this town. And it explains why, whether you're talking about Asian refugees or restaurants, Luong believes there's always room for one more.

All in the family

There are more than 30 Oriental restaurants — most of them Chinese — in the Fort Wayne area. Six of them opened last year alone.

When he came here a little more than a decade ago, Luong remembers, the Pagoda on the south side of town and Chen's on the north satisfied most of this city's cravings for egg-drop soup and sweet-and-sour chicken.

Chen's, one of the city's first Oriental restaurants and the only early one that still exists, opened in Northcrest Shopping Center in 1959. Gong Chen, See DYNASTY, Page 3F ▶



WORKING TOGETHER: Diem Huynh and her husband, Chien Tran, opened Hainan House with family help.



Photos by STEVE LINSENMAYER of *The News-Sentinel*

THEIR OWN PLACE: Son Tran and Phan Luong worked at other restaurants until they could buy Shanghai Express.

Fig. 1: Tannehill, C. (1993, March 16). Creating a restaurant dynasty. *The News-Sentinel*.

My relationship with my family was rife with loss, voids, and absences. I say this not to fault any individual nor evoke sympathy, but rather to underscore a pattern of lack and deficiencies pervasive in Asian American families. To expand on this, I would like to first detail a timeline of my parents' histories before and after their respective arrivals in America. My parents were among the second wave of Vietnamese refugees to emigrate which entailed cultural orientation training at refugee camps before being allowed entry into America. Regardless of the differing camps, the camps' purpose was to construct and enforce American identity frameworks onto the Vietnamese. Many refugees "knew they had to present themselves as healthy minds and bodies capable of discipline even at the cost of remaining silent and concealing pain from ailments, disorders, or illness", which had effectively outlined premises of submission from the 'ideal' Vietnamese subject.⁷ The U.S. government necessitated refugees to partake in this assimilation process and pursue the model minority image, otherwise facing loss of the "American Dream" and its related incentives. Consequently, the Vietnamese refugee is granted minor visibility from mainstream society as they enact ideals of the model minority, but what do we forgo in this performance?

I present these losses to think about what was gained and realized for my family in their immigration to America. At almost every major transition in my life, I have thought about my parents and whether or not I would be able to ameliorate the harm that has already penetrated their physical and psychic beings. In the process of settling here, both my parents instantaneously lost almost all of their connections to their homeland and arrived in America only to abandon their personhoods. After they arrived in Indiana, my father and my maternal relatives found employment in lines of work such as assembly line workers to service jobs. 10 years later, my father and uncle saved enough money to sponsor their parents and six siblings. Despite

⁷ Lieu, N. T. (2011). *American Dream in Vietnamese*. (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press, 8.

establishing some stability in Indiana, my parents and relatives were all constrained to jobs where they had to serve customers and many of them involuntarily stayed within these fields due to the aims of racial capitalism. Asians are obscured, illegible, and unintelligible and this obfuscation lends to stereotyping Asian Americans “as a robotic laborer whose social function revolves around economic efficiency, hard work, and professional success at all costs”.⁸ I saw this act of dehumanization mar the bodies of both my parents.

When I look at my father’s arms, I always notice the darker specks that stipple his forearms and hands. And when I am at home, I hear the rattling of medication as my mother takes her blood pressure and cholesterol medication. Their bodies trace the histories of the time and labor invested in their survival in America, but their bodies also evince the deterioration as a repercussion of their incessant work. My parents never wanted to work as servers, chefs, nor as nail technicians, but these were the only ‘choices’ offered by the American Dream. By falling prey to the notion of the American Dream, what is promised versus what is actually offered? What lives would my parents lead in Vietnam if not for U.S. interventionism? And why, after 50 years, do generations of Vietnamese Americans maintain their nationalisms to the fallen South? These were some of the questions I attempted to answer when I first came to school and I responded to some of these inquiries in *Dreaming of Chungking Express* (see fig. 2).

⁸ Huang, V. L. (2022). *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (1st ed.). Duke University Press, 12.



Fig 2: *Dreaming of Chunking Express*, December 2022.

This work features edited family archival footage, a 3D model of myself and our family’s former restaurant, and historical footage showcasing the Diệm regime. Initially, viewers are met with a wide shot of my Chungking Express. While the text is somewhat legible, the figures and images of the structure houses begin recognizable. However, the 3D rendering of me degrades and my figure is obliterated to solely simplified polygons. While this is happening, there are flashes of propaganda featuring Ngô Đình Diệm. This was my initial venture into understanding the manipulation of the American Dream and how we can deny relegation to the model minority position.

By rejecting the model minority role, those who do conform to the myth face losses “both concrete and abstract. These include homeland, family, language, identity, property, status in the community – the list goes on”.⁹ We clearly see these deprivations in the assumptions delineated by James Tollefson’s consolidation of the educational goals in all Vietnamese refugee camps (see fig. 3).¹⁰ By immigrating and conforming to the whiteness ideal, only economic and material gains can be made, however, another loss manifests in the impossibility and inaccessibility of

⁹ David L. Eng, & Shinhee Han. (2019). *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Duke University Press, 48.

¹⁰ Tollefson, J. W. (1989). *Alien winds : the reeducation of America’s Indochinese refugees*. Praeger, 70-85.

being “almost the same, but not white”. Although the model minority subject is granted meager recognition, there is a melancholia that arises. Homi Bhabha and Freud, interpreted by Eng and Han, establish an “ambivalence” in attempts “to mimic Western ideals of whiteness” resulting in an “inevitable, built-in failure”.¹¹ In following these conventions of whiteness, our position as the peripheral subject is further foregrounded; the rifts between us and the white center widen.

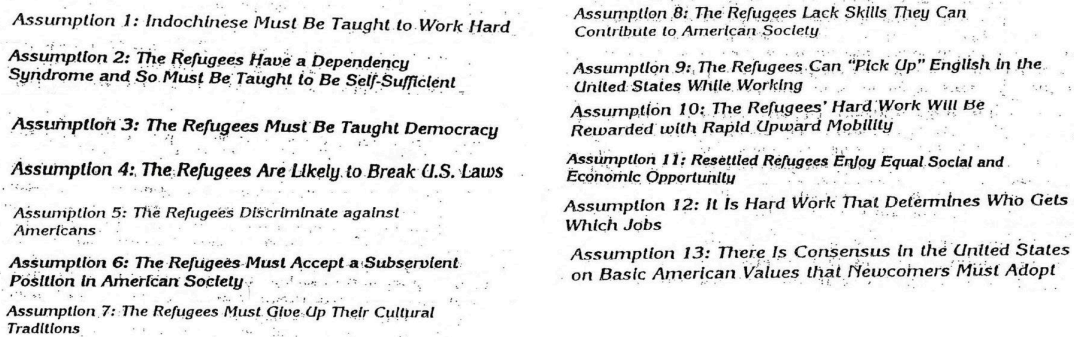


Fig. 3: James Tollefson’s Assumptions of Vietnamese Refugee Camps’ Resettlement Goals intends to sentence the Asian American to interminable failure, but perhaps in these faults, we can “depathologize” the affects of melancholia and co-opt melancholia as a means of resistance.

¹¹ David L. Eng, & Shinhee Han. (2019). *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Duke University Press, 44.

Chapter 2: Figurations as Nonhuman

Growing up, I found negotiations of the Asian identity through blog posts, photos of Asian people that defied hetero-patriarchal expectations, and videos on YouTube that suggested a control over one's image that did not denigrate their Asianness. In these digital spaces, I was able to access archives and exercise an emotional freedom that I could not in the real world. And my father showed me ways to push the limitations of the digital spaces. During certain moments when my father had some free time, he taught me how to rip data from discs and how to pirate software so I could find means to entertain myself when he could not be physically present. These lessons he taught me were out of necessity and practicality, but I could not help but feel excitement in discovering this means of taking control.

While being online allowed me to disrupt hegemony somewhat, the whole of the Internet does not reflect a utopic world of equality. As the Internet became more widespread, “both popular culture and academic theorists promised freedom from the constraints of race, gender, sexual preference, and class via the Internet,” but these predictions were disproven as the Internet acted as another realm for the othering of Asians and projections of Orientalist imaginings.¹² In

¹² Roh, D. S., Huang, B., & Niu, G. A. (Eds.). (2015). *Techno-Orientalism : imagining Asia in speculative fiction, history, and media*. Rutgers University Press, 144.

the wake of globalism, China's industrialization and Japan's technological innovation act as threats to Western hegemony. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu observe that "while Orientalism defines a modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern East, techno-Orientalism symmetrically and yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive, futurized Asia to further affirm the West's centrality" and we encounter a conflation of the Asian with technology.¹³ Again, the Asian is abstracted and isolated on the "margins of modernity".¹⁴

Last year, I wanted to address an internalization of this othering in the context of AI and in the rampant dissemination of anti-Asian and Sinophobic rhetoric online. When we navigate social media, we are faced with decisions and consequences of our online presence and presentation. Once we have determined how we wish to curate our digital identity, we then have to confront this concept of *Machine Realism* coined by Trevor Paglen. In the social media landscape, *Machine Realism* denotes "an aesthetic and interpretive mode defined by the autonomous attribution of meaning to images by machine learning and AI systems deployed in the service of capital, police, and militaries" which can have deleterious effects on the marginalized user.¹⁵ These processes attempt to ascribe meaning to our digital selves and in this process, we lack recourse in cases where these consignments are based on racialized and gendered falsehoods. In response to *Machine Realism*, I attempted to suggest that we can exact some power over these fabrications through *ảnh hào quang*.

ảnh hào quang was an investigation into the image databases of AI systems and by feeding prompts such as "Vietnamese people having fun in America", the AI-generated images

¹³ Roh, D. S., Huang, B., & Niu, G. A., *Techno-Orientalism : imagining Asia in speculative fiction, history, and media*, 7.

¹⁴ Cheng, A. A. (2019). *Ornamentalism*. Oxford University Press, 23.

¹⁵ Kholeif, O. (2018). *I Was Raised on the Internet*. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 116.

hint semblances of U.S. and Vietnamese flags, suggestions of Asian human figures, and imitations of American suburbia (see fig. 4 and 5). These forms would travel from the foreground into the background and this amalgamation became a composite for loss and perpetual unbelonging. This video was displayed on a CRT TV placed on a Buddhist shrine intended to discuss the distances and dehumanizations between us and our ancestors. Are we complicit in assimilationist tactics in othering generations of Asians before us? Racial capitalism intends to other and divide us even from our own communities and can do so by offering us deceptive or illusory images of our people through Hollywood depictions, and more contemporarily via digital spaces. While the figures presented in *ảnh hào quang* are uncanny and verge on caricature, anti-Asian sentiment and Sinophobia already persists in the spread of decontextualized images paired with intentionally incorrect translations about China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the hands of the US empire, the digital space has already been weaponized to consolidate the Asian person to a monolith voiding us of our agency and autonomy. Due to arbitrary racial categorizations, the Asiatic is effaced and acts as a blank screen. On the screen, we observe projections of monsters and/or machines, anxieties of yellow peril and/or fetishized fantasies; any *thing* other than what is recognized as human.



Fig. 4 and 5: Stills from *ảnh hào quang*, February 2023.

Lisa Lowe explains “These processes of differentiation have provided the means for capital to exploit through the fracturing and segmentation of different sectors of the labor force,” and the Asian American must concede to said labor expectations to survive.¹⁶ My cousins and I grew up without the presence of many of our parental figures due to the demands of their service jobs. This is not an isolated phenomenon to just my family, rather many Asian American children grow up being raised by their grandparents or with minimal parental contact. I believe this is one contributor to the rifts and divides occurring intergenerationally in Asian America.

Through these works, I attempted to acknowledge the labor that my parents and extended family members unwillingly performed since their resettlement in America. After a call with my parents during the fall of 2023, I learned that my father no longer had the option to work remotely and had to find separate housing again closer to his workplace. Simultaneously, my mother’s coworker had quit and another had returned to Vietnam so my mother had to compensate by working seven days a week. After hearing my mother return to working seven days each week, this conversation encouraged a slight shift in research and focus for my artmaking practice.

While my earlier works do not explicitly address labor violence, I wanted to make it a more prevalent theme in my later works as I reflected on my ancestors’ past and current labor efforts. I became even more focused on conceptualizations of Asian subjects as faceless laborers. What factors contributed to the designation of service worker to the Asiatic? We can attribute this essentialization to a variety of “legal, political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic” subjugations throughout the timeline of the U.S. However I would like first to underscore a more general framework of othering as explained by Lisa Lowe:

¹⁶ Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts : on Asian American cultural politics*. Duke University Press, 28.

[T]he project of imagining the nation as homogenous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally ‘foreign’ origins antipathetic to the modern American society that ‘discovers,’ ‘welcomes,’ and ‘domesticates’ them.¹⁷

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* briefly defines “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” and via the Orientalist gaze, Asians and Asian Americans become a void of a human; a nonbeing.¹⁸ Alienation, exoticization, and objectification are Orientalist productions endured by the Asiatic, all of which have been weaponized since the genesis of the U.S. state. Specifically, I am interested in an offshoot of Edward Said’s Orientalism model, techno-Orientalism. Techno-Orientalism “constructs Asians as mere simulacra and maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor—the very antithesis of Western liberal humanism.”¹⁹ In contrast to Orientalism, techno-Orientalism distinguishes a particular link that connects Asia to speculative fiction (SF) and futures where Asians are bereft of autonomy and instead, Asians are equated to robots rather than humans. Regardless of techno-Orientalism’s fictive nature, by depriving the Asiatic of their humanity in SF, the real-life Asian individual faces endangerment at the hands of the American white citizen.

Long T. Bui in *Model Machines: A History of the Asian as Automaton* confronts the consequences of techno-Orientalist rhetoric in his examination of Vincent Chin’s murder in 1982. Vincent Chin, a Chinese American draftsman, was beaten to death by two white male auto workers. Chin’s assailants rendered Chin as an expendable and inhuman “unmasculine drone.” In this violent invisibilization of Vincent Chin, his killers externalized their resentments towards

¹⁷ Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts : on Asian American cultural politics*. Duke University Press, 5–6.

¹⁸ Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism* (First Vintage books edition.). Vintage Books, 3.

¹⁹ Roh, D. S., Huang, B., & Niu, G. A. (Eds.). (2015). *Techno-Orientalism : imagining Asia in speculative fiction, history, and media*. Rutgers University Press, 5.

“Japan’s corporate threat, the Chinese communist state, the Vietnamese gook, and an Asian American model minority” onto a supposed blank cyborg.²⁰ Soon after the killing of Vincent Chin, *Blade Runner* (1982) was released representing “Los Angeles as a ghetto for ‘hordes’ of Asian immigrants involved in service-sector labor” where said Asian subjects were portrayed as replicants in the film, or as objects on the margins of personhood.²¹

Chapter 3: The Voids, Errors, and Glitches Marking Asian American Life

In my daily life, I pray every morning and evening for my parents’ physical and mental well-being. I began to pray for their safety after a concerning rise in anti-Asian hate crimes shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began. While my father was able to work from home, my mother forced herself to return to the nail salon only a few months into the pandemic when there was not yet a vaccine available to the public. My mother went to work and risked contracting COVID-19 solely for the vanity of her customer. When a white customer enters the nail salon, the individual is greeted by my mask-wearing mother. Vivian L. Huang posits that the mask “obscures the face and stalls speech” and signals to the white citizen an “Asian inscrutable surface” evincing Orientalist notions of Asians as submissive, assimilable, and mute. In Huang’s text *Surface Relations*, they propose a co-optation of “racial forms of inscrutability” suggesting potentialities that skirt Western limitations of the Asian identity.

²⁰ Bui, L. T. (2022). *Model Machines: A History of the Asian as Automaton* (1st ed., Vol. 231). Temple University Press, 129.

²¹ Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts : on Asian American cultural politics*. Duke University Press, 84–85.

Following Huang’s articulation of “*minoritarian aesthetics of obfuscation*,” I created a single-channel video *tiệm làm nail* that mediates the potency of the vanishing point and Asian American visibilities (see fig. 6 and 7). In this piece, I appropriated a Facebook livestream of my mom’s nail salon taken without my mother’s consent while overlaying the opacities of my mother when she was younger. I intended to simultaneously spotlight images of my mother that she enjoyed, to refuse the objectification in the livestream recording. As the photographs alter in opacity and form, the background plays a recording of a video feedback loop, eluding normative presentations of the horizon line. Rather than entertaining identitarian and representational politics that suggest our perpetual unbelonging, let us, instead, consider the multitudes when we divest from white heteronormative frameworks. As we shirk imperialist consignments, we queer the horizons and vanishing points and cultivate worlds beyond Orientalist projections of the Asian identity.

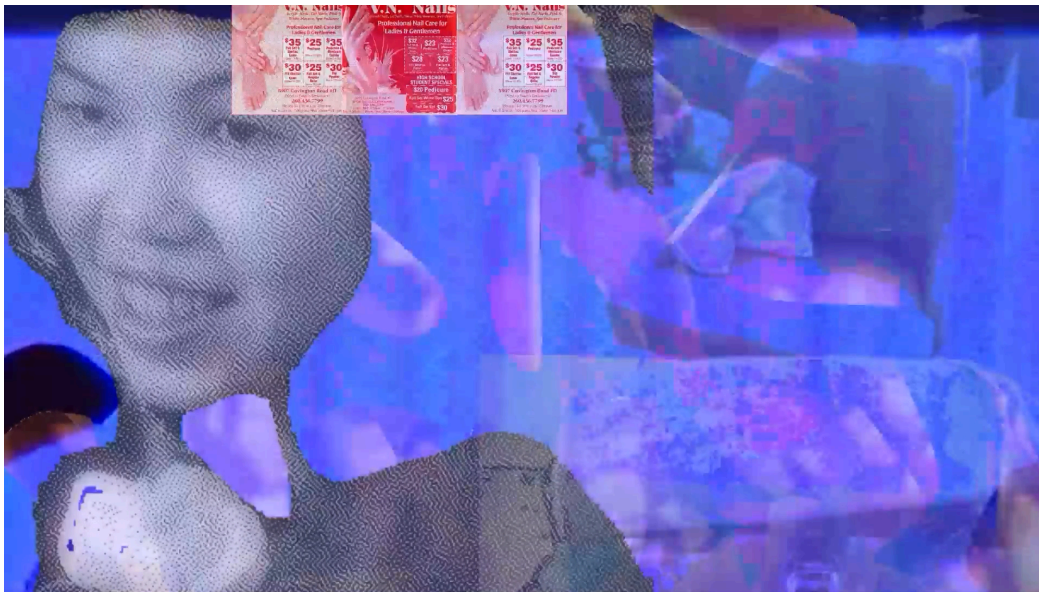


Fig. 6: Still from *tiệm làm nail* featuring my mother’s portrait, November 2023.



Fig. 7: Still from *tiệm làm nail*, November 2023.

My most recent video experimentation *Phước* explored the invisibility, losses, and ghosts that haunt Asian American histories, I continue to expand on Vivian L. Huang's queer inscrutability framework and Rosa Menkman's theorizations of the glitch (see fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Still from *Phước*, March 2024.

Unlike previous works, the glitch plays more of a central role in debasing intelligibility. Menkman's *Glitch Studies Manifesto* helped me further synthesize glitch theoretical frameworks with artistic models found in Asian American studies. While similar to Huang's racial aesthetic modes, Menkman contends digital noise and noise artifacts (both visually and sonically) are oftentimes defined as breaks and incongruencies in data and information. Noise artifacts, like the impenetrable Asiatic, are "voids generated by a break are not only a lack of meaning, but also powers that force the reader to move away from traditional discourse." Menkman asks readers to reframe and critique prominent formulations of noise and glitch.²² In the digital space, I came to understand my maternal grandfather's fate as a victim of both Vietnamese refugee violence and more so the U.S.'s neglect of Vietnamese refugees. Through an obfuscation of my paternal grandfather's figure and submitting our bodies to the glitch, I was able to come to terms with his

²² Menkman, R. (2010). *Glitch Studies Manifesto*, 2.

death earlier this year. Digital noise and the glitch inundate our digital selves while the souls and spirits of our ancestors envelop our corporeal bodies.

Additionally, Menkman's fourth tenet/demand asks artists to "Use the glitch as an exoskeleton of progress" to question and critique what standardizations exist for the "ordinary" and to shy away from rigid and fixed demarcations of meaning-making and desirability.

Likewise, Huang asserts:

As Surface Relations studies, the gendered racial construction of an inscrutable other depends on and forms a perpetual foreigner whose "nature" or "meaning" cannot be satisfyingly entered or inhabited, and therefore whose gender, sexuality, and race cannot be unilaterally manipulated for the purposes of white imperialist nation building.²³

Is the Asian/American experience exclusively contingent on Orientalist logic? And is the glitch strictly understood as an obstruction or loss of information? Huang and Menkman both recognize the possible damage that can incur when conforming to normative figurations of aesthetics and legibility, but in the negative spaces that house Asian American life and glitches, there also lies an expanse of potentials and possibilities.

Finally, I want to contextualize my motivations and intentions when repurposing my family's archive of photos and videos. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe articulates the notion of a "*past conditional temporality*" as a potential negotiation of the gaps in the historical documentation of transatlantic Chinese "coolies." More broadly though Lowe offers this mode of thinking as a way to understand the amorphous disposition in constructions of the past. Lowe further explains the past conditional temporality:

²³ Huang, V. L. (2022). *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (1st ed.). Duke University Press, 76.

“The past conditional temporality of ‘what could have been’ symbolizes a space of attention that holds at once the positive objects and methods upheld by modern history and social science, as well as the inquiries into connections and convergences rendered unavailable by these methods. It is a space of reckoning that allows us to revisit times of historical contingency and possibility to consider alternatives that may have been *unthought* in those times, and might otherwise remain so now, in order to imagine different futures ahead.”²⁴

The pull of the American Dream and the material conditions in Vietnam enticed my ancestors to resettle in the United States. After their resettlement in America, the conditions they lived in were only slightly better. When I look at my family’s archive, I notice the specters that haunt Asian America. Of course, there are images where my parents are among other Vietnamese refugees. And there also exist photographs that document my parents’ return to Vietnam after the borders reopened. My parents are fine physically and mentally, nor do express explicit regrets about their immigration. This does not stop me from thinking about “what could have been” if not for US interventionism and the force of “liberal political reason.” I constantly imagine a timeline where my parents would not have had to endure the traumas of war, food scarcity, and the violence of being othered and objectified. Regardless of these unknowns, I want to reiterate that I am imagining a future that pushes for agency and autonomy for not just my family, but for the entirety of Asian America.

²⁴ Lowe, L. (2015). *The intimacies of four continents*. Duke University Press, 175.

Conclusion

Lastly, I want to highlight this work featured at the MFA thesis show (see fig. 9).



Fig. 9: 49, May 2024.

I am calling attention to this work because it acts as a consolidation and culmination of my research interests throughout the MFA program. At first, I explored ideas of assimilation and American Dream narratives by recreating environments and objects relevant to my past. However, I felt unsure about the reactions of my intended audiences through these initial works. During the first couple of quarters of the program, I found myself trying to bridge the gaps in my family's fragmented history. I took courses in Southeast Asian history, I took a Vietnamese

language course, and I self-researched the family history I did not understand nor told about. Additionally, I had many conversations with my parents and Asian American peers about their own experiences of being in America. Only after the first year did I feel more comfortable about the decisions I was making in my practice. This work, *49*, addresses the specters that fill the histories of Asian Americans. On forty-nine punch cards, I created these three renderings solely using the family archive. We see the pull of the American Dream and within the landscape of America, the time card shows through. Likewise, ghosts haunt the landscape. I chose the time card as a material to print on to make explicit ideas of inscrutability, expendability, and loss. For the sake of accumulating capital, Western hegemony is more than willing to render Asian Americans as subservient workers.

While this is the current reality, I think about how Asian Americans were able to subvert the dominant power. One such example is the case of the paper son which I also addressed in this latest print work. The paper sons made use of reductive Orientalist framing of Asian people to their benefit and I want to continue this tradition of subversion through notions of glitch and intelligibility. In unmaking hetero-patriarchal beliefs, I truly believe in finding a future where we are free to act and be. When we break down dominant structures, “the real dragon will fly out” and we will no longer be suppressed. There is potential in these ghosts that permeate throughout the horizon. I know Asian Americans will be free.

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