

Critical Essay

Gender and Race in Vietnamese American Culture: Queer Passivity in the Work of Pipo Nguyen-duy^{1,2}

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When I started my graduate study in the late 1980s, I was interested in American literature and theories of postmodernism. At that time, teachers and students were so much fascinated with the so-called French poststructuralist theories, and we read Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and others quite seriously. I myself worked on Derrida very hard, and I also read postmodernist American writers such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. Eventually, I went to Buffalo, New York, where I got a Ph. D. in comparative literature in 1996.

After I returned to Japan, I started teaching courses on American literature and comparative cultural studies. In one of the courses, I taught a history of American literature after World War II, and, as most teachers did at that time and probably still do today, I included Vietnam War films and stories in the course. This means I taught Tim O'Brien (*If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*), Michael Herr (*Dispatches*), Oliver Stone (*Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*), Stanley Kubrick (*Full-Metal Jacket*), and even Sylvester Stallone (*First Blood*).

At one point, however, I noticed that the films and stories that I taught in that course were all created by American directors and writers—white males, actually—and, therefore, they were all produced from the American—white male—perspective. I was a little embarrassed, because the war was fought in Vietnam. So there should be some Vietnamese and, possibly, Vietnamese American artists working on the topic of war. The time was in the late 1990s, and it was a kind of very good timing for me to have this problematic: because of the digital revolution at that time, I was easily able to make quick and thorough research on the net. What I came to know was Vietnamese Americans had just started to create works on their own experiences in and out of Vietnam, while voices of Vietnamese writers were in some cases censored in their home country and yet published in the United States and other western countries after having been translated into English.

This certainly changed my direction as a scholar working on postmodern American literature. I decided to focus on Vietnamese American artists as examples of postmodern diaspora, and my first

attempt was to translate into Japanese Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), a story about traditional Vietnamese culture as well as suffering experiences of a Vietnamese American girl who immigrated to the United States because of the war. Then, I came to know Monique Truong, Long Nguyen, Pipo Nguyen-duy, and others. These artists have certainly expanded my perspective and broadened my field of study.

In the summer of 2012, I had an opportunity to conduct research in Los Angeles where I met a number of local Vietnamese American artists and scholars. Among them was Lan Duong. Lan Duong is a very active feminist scholar teaching at the University of California, Riverside. When we met, she had just completed *Treacherous Subjects* (2012), a book in which she analyzes a variety of Vietnamese artists, not just Vietnamese American but also Vietnamese Vietnamese, from what she calls "Trans-Vietnamese Feminist" point of view. "Trans-Vietnamese Feminism," Duong argues, is a notion which challenges "the braided ideology of patriarchy and nationalism," as it "decenters nationalist notions of the family and familial notion of the nation, both dependent on each other and on circumscribed roles for men and women": the purpose of Trans-Vietnamese feminism is "to challenge traditional notions of gender, family, and nation" (3).

I find that this is a very important thesis when we think about Vietnamese American art and culture, since Vietnamese immigrants to the United States have witnessed a number of changes in their life as men and women, parents and children, and members of new communities. In particular, the so-called 1.5 generationers have gone through radical changes in their relations to the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans as well as to the immigrants of their parents' generation—I will return to this topic of the 1.5 generation later. Even though I do not take the feminist approach in this essay, I will focus on the question of gender and race, drawing attention to what I call "queer passivity" of the Vietnamese American male artist in the work of Pipo Nguyen-duy. In the following, I will work on Pipo's deconstruction and reconstruction of his own Vietnamese American identity and, in so doing, try to see his sense of being Vietnamese American as a challenger against "traditional notions of gender, family, and nation."

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Pipo Nguyen-duy is a Vietnamese American fine art photographer of the 1.5 generation. Born in Hue, Vietnam, in 1962, Pipo immigrated to the United States in 1975 when he was thirteen as a boat refugee.³ Since he came to the States still at a young age, Pipo was educated in America and eventually got a Master of Arts in photography from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, in 1992 and then a Master of Fine Arts in 1995. This biographical background demonstrates that Pipo belongs to the so-called 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans.

According to Sucheng Chang who has popularized the notion of the Vietnamese American 1.5 generation in her influential *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* (2006), the 1.5 generation-

ers are “immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, if not always to read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms.” Chang argues that “[s]uch individuals perform a unique bridging function, given their ability to understand both their elders and their American-born peer.” They sometimes function as cultural brokers, even when they do not wish to do so, between their Vietnamese relatives—grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles—and the younger, usually American-born family members.⁴ In a word, the 1.5 generationers “mediate not only between different generations in their families, but between American and Vietnamese ways of life and thought as well.” As a result, they have come to be very aware of “the in-between spaces they occupy” in their community (xiv).

So, unlike their parents’ generation, the 1.5 generationers are young immigrants having opportunities to learn the English language and American customs and manners so as to live like another American. Lan Cao, for example, graduated from Mount Holyoke College and then went to Yale Law School for the Juris Doctor, and Monique Truong also obtained the J.D. at Columbia. This, however, is not to say that their assimilation has been totally successful. In fact, we can see the wide gap spread between Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation and mainstream American Americans, which the 1.5 generationers are supposed to fill: filling the gap is always very challenging and most of the 1.5 generationers are unable to do it quite easily. This problem of filling the gap, whatever that gap means to them, is what Vietnamese American artists of the 1.5 generation have been facing and struggling with in their work.

Belonging to the Vietnamese American 1.5 generation, Pipo finds himself in a position where he sees a gap between himself and other Americans. What we can see in his work, in particular a series of self-portraits titled *AnOther Western* (1998-2004) where the artist himself wears and poses as “AnOther Westerner,” is a gap between himself and the real “Westerner,” that is, the “American white male” that Pipo is supposed to imitate in his photographs (Fig. 1). The point is no matter how carefully and closely he copies or “simulates” the way “Westerners” live and act, there always remains the gap between Americans of the European origins and new Americans—like Pipo—of Asian, or more precisely “Vietnamese,” origins. The *AnOther Western* series is where we can witness this discrepancy between traditional, nineteenth-century Americans of the European origins that the artist imitates and Pipo himself as a Vietnamese immigrant of the late-twentieth century. The racial gap, as well as the historical/time gap, is what Pipo brings to the fore in these photographs.



Fig. 1

For Pipo, therefore, the process of assimilation consists of that of “copying,” but that process is always incomplete—this is why there remains the gap—because of his racial-ethnic identity. Pipo coins this unfamiliar word “assimilation” in order to describe this incomplete process of assimilation:

My current project is titled Assimilation. It is a tragic comedy dealing with race, sex, and gender, with respect to cultural assimilation. [...] Assimilation uses the visual language of one culture to simulate that of another—an artistic assimilation analogous to the simulation in cultural assimilation. However, the self-conscious artifice serves only to highlight the artificiality inherent in the process of assimilation. Assimilation is thus an acknowledgement of a culturally “in-between” place, where one belongs to both cultures, yet at the same time neither. (“Pipo Nguyen-duy”)

Importantly, what Pipo brings to the fore with this notion of “assimilation” is not really the process of “assimilation,” because, as I have mentioned, that process is always incomplete: rather he draws attention to the process of “de-assimilation.” And what Pipo “de-assimilates” in his work is not only the conventional notion of the “American” as white male: he also deconstructs the accepted notion of “Vietnamese Americans,” or more precisely, “Vietnamese immigrants in the United States,” whose presence almost always reminds American Americans of the disasters and nightmares that U.S. soldiers went through in the Vietnam war.

Pipo’s “assimilation” strategy also works to undermine the traditional notion of gender. In



Fig. 2

“Anonymous IV,” another photograph where he mimics a quite famous European painting *Gabrielle d’Estrées and the Duchesse de Villars*, he poses semi-nude with his woman-like breast pinched by another woman (Fig. 2). While the original painting raised a topic of lesbianism at the end of sixteenth-century Europe, “Anonymous IV” raises a topic of transgender: Pipo undermines the western tradition of fine arts, as he puts himself in a position of a sexually attractive European woman at the same time he demonstrates his own Asian identity by wearing Kimono-like cloth. The photograph reminds us of David Henry Hwang’s critical comment on the racial and homosexual relations between the so-called “rice queen”—“a gay Caucasian man primarily attracted to Asians”—and the Asian man in

an “Afterword” to *M. Butterfly* (1988) in which Hwang argues that “[i]n these relationships, the Asian virtually always plays the role of the ‘woman’; the Rice Queen, culturally and sexually, is the ‘man’” (98). In a word, Pipo’s passivity signifies the Asian male’s feminized position in his relations to the white male.⁵ So the question of transgender, which we can see in “Anonymous IV,” can be translated into that of racial power imbalance in homo-social, and possibly homo-sexual, relations between white America and Asian America, as both Hwang and Pipo problematize it in their work respectively.

Yet in another work, Pipo tries to recover this lost masculinity of the Asian male in Western culture. In *Perseus and Medusa* (Fig. 3), Pipo assumes strong, western masculinity, when he disguises himself as Perseus, a Greek hero, killing Medusa. The topic is quite popular in European art: there are a number of statues of Perseus holding the head of Medusa in Europe and the United States, and the one that Pipo simulates in his work is Laurent Marqueste’s *Perseus and the Gorgon* (1890), which is exhibited at Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. Marqueste’s original, like other Perseus statues, represents Perseus holding Medusa’s head with his left hand, since the Greek hero holds a sword with his right hand and, therefore, he holds the head with the other hand.

But, Pipo is about to hold the head with his right hand in his work,. Here again, the Vietnamese American artist tries to undo the western tradition of fine arts, first by disguising himself or his Asian-self as the legendary Greek hero and then by holding the head with his right hand. Actually, in the photo, we cannot see Pipo’s left hand and, therefore, it is hard to say whether or not he holds the sword with his left hand. But, the head is cut in front of the artist-hero, so he must have cut the head off the body by himself: it is most likely that Pipo holds his sword with his left hand. This leads us to conclude that our artist-hero, that is, the Asian “Perseus” is left-handed! While Pipo in this work may appear to be very aggressive, his taking over of the position of the Greek hero is quite devious in the sense that he uses the wrong hand to cut off the head of Medusa in the western tradition of fine arts.

Then, Pipo’s artistic, and also artificial, challenges against western art tradition should be counted among examples of Vietnamese American art where not a few Vietnamese American artists try to undermine traditional notions of gender and race as well as that of national origins. In fact, Pipo draws attention to what I would like to call “queer passivity” of the Vietnamese American male in American society, and he also deconstructs the passive attitude



Fig. 3

of Vietnamese Americans.⁶ Pipo plays a role of the Asian male whose “queer passivity” attracts our attention, most typically in a work like “Anonymous IV.” In that work as well as in the *AnOther Western* series, he is the focal point where the Asian male’s passiveness and queerness in American society is enacted and, then, reenacted. At the same time, however, we should note that it is Pipo himself who reconstructs and, also, dramatizes the queer passivity of the Asian male, as he actually plays a positive role of the photographer so as to undermine the queer presence of the Asian male in American society that he himself is embodying as an object of his own camera eye. In a word, Pipo identifies himself as both a passive agent of the queer Asian male and a positive one of the camera eye/I who rewrites the history of the Asian self.

Now we can say that Pipo’s challenges against western artwork demonstrate the possibility of deconstructing and, then, reconstructing “alternative histories” or just simply “stories” of Vietnamese Americans from the Vietnamese American point of view. And the stories that he rewrites are not about “who they actually are” but about “who they would have been” if they had not suffered the war and, thus, not immigrated to the United States. This is to say that Pipo tries to bring to the fore Vietnamese people’s alternative relations to people in America: Vietnamese people “could have been placed” differently, or they “would never have been placed at all” in America, if there had never been the American military involvement in the war in Vietnam first of all.⁷

While most of Pipo’s photographs do not deal with the topic of the war directly, the underlying motif in his work is certainly related to the war: his work would never have been created but for the war. “Death and identity,” Pipo argues, “are the underlying themes of my work as I explore my memories of violence and chaos of the Vietnam War and my assimilation into Western culture” (“Pipo Nguyen-duy”). And yet Pipo’s purpose in creating a series of works is not just to represent the process of assimilation that Vietnamese immigrants have gone through in the United States. He also draws attention to the possibility of alternative histories where Vietnamese Americans would reconstruct their relations to American Americans differently and more positively. So his memories of the war are recycled and reused in his work to make positive effects, and I believe that people affected by his work are not only Vietnamese Americans but also American Americans.

Notes

- 1 This essay is written based on the research conducted on the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) “Cultural Studies after Postmodernism: Practices of Cultural Translation and Vietnamese American Culture” (ID: 13205114). Part of this essay was presented at the Nagoya University International Conference “Race and Ethnicity in American Literature and Culture” on March 16, 2013.
- 2 I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Pipo Nguyen-duy for allowing me to use the photocopies of “AnOther Western Series #1,” “Anonymous IV,” and *Perseus and Medusa* in this essay. I wish him further success in his future artistic endeavors.
- 3 Pipo described himself as a boy “growing up within thirty kilometers of the demilitarized zone of the 18th

- Parallel” and “hearing gunfire every day of his early life” (*Pipo Nguyen-duy*).
- 4 We can see this bridging function most typically in Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* where a 1.5 generation daughter Mai helps her Vietnamese-speaking mother in American community.
- 5 Hwang even argues that “[t]his pattern of relationships [between the Rice Queen and the Asian male] had become so codified that, until recently, it was considered unnatural for gay Asians to date one another. Such men [gay Asians in these relations] would be taunted with a phrase which implied they were lesbians” (98). See also Eng’s argument on the emasculation and also feminization of Asian American male in *Racial Castration*.
- 6 The notion of “queer passivity” can be shared by other Vietnamese American artists of the 1.5 generation. For example, Le, photo and video artist/poet/critic, focuses on the homosociality and also homosexuality of “twenty gay male subjects” in a series of photos titled “pictures of you” with a poem called “Paper Whites (Narcissus).” In this work, Le explores senses of “masculinity, vulnerability, loss, race, sexuality and the politics of desire,” as he challenges the effeminized position of the Asian—Vietnamese—American self in his relations to other Americans, not necessarily white but also black (42). In so doing, he tries to reshape his racial and sexual position in American society.
- 7 Analyzing Truong’s *The Book of Salt*, Eng argues that the writer draws attention to the possible presence of “a queer time and space outside teleological histories,” as she describes the mysterious, possibly homosexual relationship between her narrator named Binh, meaning “Peace” in Vietnamese, and Ho Chi Minh, the founding father of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Actually, in *The Book of Salt*, the name of Ho Chi Minh is never named and his presence is ghostly in Binh’s narrative. In a word, as Eng rightly points out, Binh’s desires “stage another time and space of historical becoming” in his queer relationship with the father of socialist Vietnam: the possibility of queer, or alternative, relationship between “Peace” and the “Republic” can be translated into a story of “what could have been” for people in Vietnam (1484, 1485, 1484).

Works Cited

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