

This text was written by **Justin Quang Nguyen Phan** (PhD Candidate at University of California, Riverside) and has been excerpted from their talk entitled [“Sonic Infidelities: Performing Time, Space, and Nonalignment in Hương Ngô’s \*In the Shadow of the Future\*,”](#) delivered as part of the Global Asian Studies GLAS Lecture Series at the University of Illinois Chicago on March 5, 2021, 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM. It has been reprinted here with their permission.

## **Sonic Infidelities as Refugee Aesthetic**

... my talk today analyzes Hương Ngô’s *In the Shadow of the Future*. It suggests that Ngô uses rehearsal and low fidelity to enact sonic infidelities. However, before I can delve closer into a close reading of her work, I want to spend some time elaborating how Ngô’s use of low fidelity speaks to both community politics in Vietnamese music and also a broader refugee aesthetic repertoire of using what’s on hand to make art.

Growing up with a working-class, refugee background, Ngô talks in an interview about how she draws on interdisciplinary art practice because it is: “just in my nature—what I need—but also it’s so that people can enter into the work from different ways, from different directions.” Sharing that her parents taught her to embroider, sew, and tinker with machines and electronics, Ngô’s art practice works to “find a way to make things work” even if she didn’t have the perfect materials.<sup>[1]</sup> This orientation to her art, then, might be understood as part of the building of a refugee aesthetic repertoire, since Ngô approaches her aesthetic and art practice through a mix of research and using what’s on hand. In her bio, Ngô characterizes her art practice as both archeological and futuristic, folding and unfolding layers to “continuously make and unmake an unruly archive.”

*In the Shadow of the Future* is just that—an unruly archive. In it, Ngô makes use of several elements. In the center, Ngô installs a home-made architectural fixture, composed of triangular frames. The fixture itself holds three television screens from different angles, forcing the viewer to walk around, kneel, and bend over to see. Ngô continues to layer the exhibit. In the videos themselves, we see the fruits of Ngô’s collaboration with a multigenerational group of Vietnamese diasporic and refugee communities in France.

With the youth, Ngô examines a famous figure in Vietnamese history, Phạm Tuấn. Phạm Tuấn, in 1979, was selected by the Vietnamese government to take part in a Soviet initiative called the Interkosmos Program. As a show of friendship diplomacy, Interkosmos took members from newly independent countries such as Vietnam and brought them to space,

making him the first Asian person to go to space. In an act that complicates his legacy, Ngo has the youth reperform his character in present-day France.

They dress in makeshift space uniforms and walk around public spaces in France today, evoking the various histories of displacement that brought Vietnamese communities to France in the first place. As this is all going on, Ngo layers her installation with a 12-minute audio clip played on repeat. It uses two different interpretations of the same Vietnamese song. One is a phone recording of a choir rehearsal and the other is a lofi remix of a performance by singer Lan Anh that Ngo found online. While I'll go into a closer analysis of the song and its origin later, it is important to note that both interpretations present the song through low fidelity sound.

In my close reading, Ngo's use of "low fidelity" is part of her refugee aesthetic repertoire. She mobilizes low fidelity to disidentify from how high definition recording technologies, whether HD or hifi, which has often been associated with markers of wealth, philosophical meditations on pure sound re-production, and technological innovations in the music industry. Moreover, Ngo's refugee aesthetic repertoire also reuses found video footage from the Internet to create this archive, ranging from online resources by the National Audiovisual Institute in France to clips of Vietnamese performances on YouTube.

In privileging lofi, Ngo's refugee aesthetic repertoire is reminiscent of a long tradition of minoritized artists that use lofi, standard definition, and whatever medium is on hand for their work. There is an entire corpus of Southeast Asian artists who use and reuse materials found within fragmented and destroyed archives, ruins, found footage, Ebay, textiles, oral history, their bodies, and whatever else they can find. In ways that are in conversation with Chicana theories of *rasquachismo*,<sup>[2]</sup> they create an aesthetics from what is left behind, left as trash, and left in plain sight as a means of employing low definition and low fidelity to resist dominant cultural structures through the process of repurposing found and salvaged material.

Drawing from a refugee aesthetics, Ngo's use of lofi also bears importance within the Vietnamese specific context here too. Ngo doesn't only frame fidelity in the sonic terms of lofi/hifi. Ngo also interrogates how sound intersects with Cold War alignments. In Ngo's work, politics of music also impact Vietnamese communities. For some context, how we think about Vietnamese music is often interfacing directly or indirectly with Cold War politics. For instance, the Vietnamese genres of Yellow Music and Red Music demonstrate this point. As a genre, Red Music often thinks about North Vietnam and is also broadly characterized by songs that emphasize the Vietnamese people's revolutionary spirit against colonial and foreign occupation. Inversely, Yellow Music was used to designate songs that

emerged from South Vietnam. Framed by North Vietnam and the eventual Vietnamese state as superfluous displays of bourgeois popular culture, Yellow Music as an expression of South Vietnam was rendered antithetical to the Vietnamese state's values. As such, the Vietnamese state viewed Yellow Music as a sickness that needed to be censored, banning the listening to Yellow Music in Vietnam (listeners could listen to Red Music instead). As a result, the Vietnamese state's actions also effectively caused the proliferation of Yellow Music in overseas Vietnamese communities that had fled the communist state. Presumed to be recorded with the best recording technologies, histories of Red Music and Yellow Music attempt to gesture to forms of conflicting nationalisms, here. Ngo's use of these nationalist genres of music, however, emphasizes the role of lofi in her aesthetic.

As such, rather than present Red Music in its original format, Ngo repurposes a song within the Red Music genre called *Tieng Hat Giua Rung Pac Bo* and renders it into a lofi remix and lofi recording. In doing so, Ngo allows us to hear how sonic and political questions of fidelity also impact Vietnamese music genres. What she is troubling through her use of lofi isn't just about the judgement of the quality of sound, but also about the judgement of the quality of one's political leanings. In other words, what is understood to be sound or unsound politics in these songs mirrors the relative position from where one listens. The assumption goes: If you listen to Red Music, you must be communist. If you listen to Yellow Music, you must be anticommunist. Hifi renditions of these songs render visible an assumption that the singer or listener reproduces the prevailing logic of communist alignment or anticommunist affinity. These songs take on a life of their own.

In this context, Ngo betrays both. Using whatever is on hand—whether a YouTube clip or a grainy phone recording—Ngo disidentifies from evaluative scripts of hifi/lofi sound and community assessments of communist or anticommunist politics for Vietnamese refugees. Instead, she privileges the diasporic voice by installing her sound recording of a Vietnamese choir and of the remix of the song she made in collaboration with a Vietnamese DJ in France. In this way, I see Ngo's sonic and political betrayals as part of a feminist refugee aesthetic repertoire.

Using feminist betrayal, Ngo's sonic infidelities, then, betray Manichean politics of pure fidelity in order to expose the Cold War for the disembodied metaphor it is. Moreover, in betraying the Cold War metaphor, Ngo demonstrates how the Cold War was also inversely rooted in a series of US and Soviet betrayals, large and small, personal *and* political, that still continue to embattle Vietnamese communities and how we approach these politics today. In this way, Ngo's refugee aesthetic repertoire advances a method that emphasizes how the Cold War as metaphor fails to capture the lived embodied realities—personal and political—of those impacted by its reach. Viewers come to hear and re-encounter modes of

refugee nonaligned agency that would be rendered invisible, always already aligned, and/or excessive to the Cold War metaphor.

So far, I've talked about how the Cold War functions as a disembodied metaphor and how Ngo's use of sound engages with a refugee aesthetic repertoire that enables her to navigate tense Vietnamese community politics. By noting how she betrays the Cold War metaphor, the earlier parts of this talk have demonstrated that Ngo's use of sound attempts to generate something different.

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### **Layers of Embodied Nonalignment: Community Politics as Refugee Rehearsal**

This is Hop Ca Que Huong, a multigenerational group of Vietnamese singers based in France who come together to perform for Vietnamese cultural events in French cities and throughout the globe. As a grouping of refugee and diasporic Vietnamese peoples, the choir is featured prominently in Huong Ngo's *In the Shadow of the Future* as Ngo's recording of their choir performance occupies well over 7 minutes of its 12 minute run time. As a choir, they also have an interesting relationship to the Vietnamese state.

In 2016, Hop Ca Que Huong began to professionally record an album called *To Quoc Yeu Thuong*, translated as *Our Beloved Fatherland*. Filled with choral arrangements that all draw from Red Music, the choir's album received praises from Vietnam's state-controlled papers, which claimed that the choir were serving as overseas ambassadors of Vietnamese identity and culture—conveniently forgetting the many other Vietnamese artists and choir who perform Yellow Music in the diaspora. These relationships were also figured in the choir's leadership. The choir's director and founder, Nguyen Ngan Ha, was also quoted in these papers, expressing how releasing this album has been a long-cherished plan of hers to more greatly convey the choir's voice to the broader Vietnamese community in France.<sup>[4]</sup> If the purpose of this talk so far has been to attune our senses to better interpret the messy dynamics of Cold War as a disembodied metaphor, how do we make sense of the choir director's sentiments here? Do we simply chalk her interest up to communist fidelity in ways similar to Lan Anh's performance?

For Ngo's work, I think there's a generative way we can read even Ngan Ha's apparent alignment to Cold War fidelity as a mode of embodied nonalignment. If we understand that the Cold War metaphor is one that attempts to exceptionalize US empire and disavow other

quote-end quote *older* colonial formations, then Ngan Ha's very articulation of Vietnamese communist politics in France renders visible a political position that is already rendered outside of the post-war Vietnamese refugee figure. The US's Cold War frame aspired for a totality when Ngan Ha's own existence in France speaks to what the US Cold War could not contain. Even in using the recording of their choir rehearsal, Ngo's presentation of the Pac Bo song leaves room for refugee nonaligned agency. As I will demonstrate, Ngo's inclusion of the choir rehearsal lets us listen to how human limits and begrudging affect also come to betray over-determined readings of the choir's own political and sonic alignments with the Vietnamese state.

For Ngô's sonic installation, the sound recording does not start with a choral arrangement of the song. Rather it starts with Ngan Ha's didactic voice as she commands her choir members to sing the song with a Northern Vietnamese accent. Before the piano accompaniment can even introduce Pac Bo, we hear the director commanding the choir to "do it again, right from the top!" to pronounce things "like *this* not *that*" and to sing the song again but this time "*with feeling*." Rather than hear an enthusiastic *yes*, we instead hear choir members practice their individual melodies, hold side conversations, and sigh at the thought of practicing this song *again*.<sup>[5]</sup> Through its unfaithfulness to pure fidelity, Ngo's use of the lofi recording orients our attention to the unruly archive of voices in the choir itself. In an interview, Ngo notes that there is something illuminating, ironic, and even *funny* about the director's attempts to correct the choir's pronunciation of words despite the fact that there were singers who spoke Vietnamese with many different accents, whether French, Southern Vietnamese, Northern Vietnamese, or Central Vietnamese. The sighs and the groans might be better understood as speaking to certain residual and emergent forms of dissent that may still perform the dominant expectation here, (noted as singing harmoniously) but perhaps not without begrudging affect (symbolized here as the group's collective sighs).

In a context that prizes the creation of one voice through the joining of many, Ngo presents an opportunity to reframe the choir as a heterogeneous ensemble whose voices were made available by successive generations of war, empire, and displacement. In other words, rather than seen as a hifi recording group, the choir's own configuration (much like Ngo's lofi sonic recording) embodies a refugee experience and aesthetics. As people who might have been displaced decades before, during, and even after the American production of the post-Vietnam War refugee, communist leaning generations of Vietnamese in France speak to other reasons for migration and mobility than that of the US's Cold War.

Moreover, we might also view Nguyen Ngan Ha's creation of the choir as enacting a refugee aesthetic repertoire as well. Indeed, the cultural labor Nguyen Ngan Ha performs in

collecting the available voices and members for her choir—organizing Vietnamese people from various areas of France and in arranging the songs themselves—function in ways similar to Ngo’s interdisciplinary art practice. As Ngo makes and unmakes archives in her art, so too does Ngan Ha make and unmake living archives through performance and song.

While this is only one example, Ngo’s use of sonic infidelities renders visible the many forms of embodied nonalignment within the Vietnamese community in France that are imagined to be external to imperial, state, and even communal narrations of Cold War time and space. We could talk more about resonances between the French context and the US context in the Q&A. But, within the Cold War metaphor, for example, intra-communal Vietnamese diasporic politics are only supposed to speak to the divisions within the community as one divided by both region (space) and generation (time). In this sense, social scientific studies of the Vietnamese community in France report that earlier generations in Vietnam are more likely to be sympathetic to communism whereas the post-1975 generation is more likely to hold anticommunist sentiments. This framing affixes the Vietnamese diasporic refugee figure as always already Manichean.

In this context, Ngan Ha’s cultural disciplining and the choir group’s regional diversity emanate then as sonic performances of infidelity. As sonic infidelities, they reject the homogenizing logics that overdetermine and align individuals to community, region, politics, and certain Cold War teleologies. As such, I read Ngo’s use of sound and performance as enacting a reorientation of Vietnamese refugee and diasporic displays of political affinity. In doing so, these sonic infidelities illuminate how these displays are simply *rehearsals* of lived experiences that index modes of embodied nonalignment that are always already there.

### **Always Already There**

If the Cold War as metaphor orients the world through a series of Manichean dichotomies, I’ve labored to show how Ngo opens an alternative conceptual standpoint to view the triangulations of the War. Drawing from a refugee aesthetic repertoire, Ngo triangulates the US and the USSR through Vietnam; North and South Vietnam through diaspora; and communist and anticommunist politics through a nonaligned reading of embodiment. In her exhibition, she literally creates an architectural fixture made of triangles, evoking a third point, space, and way, that tenderly holds the contents of her unruly archive of performance, sound, and digital video.

As such, Ngo's use of sound and performance alongside material culture creates a nonaligned aesthetic that reframes the Cold War as a disembodied metaphor, while emphasizing how Vietnamese communities in diaspora continue to embody forms of nonalignment despite Cold War obscurities and disavowal. Looking at how Ngo uses lofi, we also saw how Ngo incinerates, fragments, and betrays Cold War configurations of time and space to create something new. Through formal aesthetic and conceptual frames, Ngo presents a resounding attention to the many disavowed and disembodied realities here and there, then and now. Attending to how the Cold War is embodied in nonaligned ways can enable us to draw different geographies, tell different historiographies, and create new discourse to tell these stories of war, empire, and displacement in a way that might be more truly autonomous.

To close this talk, I return again to the clip that pairs with the Pac Bo remix. As syncopated melodies and electronic chords puncture the space's silence, we see a clip of Vietnamese youth dressed in cosmonaut costumes as they move through French public space in a cyclo. Shown laughing, waving at random onlookers, and simply existing on the streets as the French general public went about their business, the youth speak to an embodiment that exists in relation to but never wholly defined by the Cold War's legacies. In this way, Ngo re-encounters the embodied contours of Cold War time and space by situating the Asian body in orbit. Through her remediation of the space and time of the Cold War, Ngo creates conceptual slippages between how we might think about the refugee, migrant, and cosmonaut. In noting their travel, it brings attention to ourselves too as space and time travelers.

In creating this unruly archive, layered, archeological, and futuristic as it is, Ngo insists on the generative power of putting seemingly disparate things, events, knowledge formations, and structures of power *in relation*. Pham Tuan is in relation to the Vietnamese French youth, is in relation to us as people interfacing with us, is in relation to Cold War time and space, is in relation to Vietnamese settler colonialism, is in relation to anticommunism, is in relation to the Vietnamese state, is in relation to Ngo's exhibit, and so on and so forth...

By emphasizing the unruliness of relationality, Ngo's exhibition offers an alternative space to dream, think, experiment, and re-embody what it means to walk and move through this earth. It is an insistence that, embodied forms of nonalignment have always already been possible, despite and in some ways because of decades and centuries of war, empire, resettlement, cooptation, compromise, and supposed ends. We just simply need to know how and where to look.

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<sup>[1]</sup> [https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=oral\\_his\\_series](https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=oral_his_series)

<sup>[2]</sup> are in conversation with Chicano scholar Tomas Ybarra-Frausto's theorization of rasquachismo,

<sup>[3]</sup> <https://vimeo.com/104676378>

<sup>[4]</sup> The original Vietnamese paraphrased here: “Ra một đĩa CD gồm các ca khúc ca ngợi đất nước là dự định ấp ủ bấy lâu của chị Ngân Hà, nhằm chuyển tải tiếng hát của Hợp ca Quê hương rộng rãi hơn trong cộng đồng người Việt ở Pháp” from <https://nhandan.com.vn/nguoi-viet-xa-xu/hop-ca-que-huong-the-hien-tinh-yeu-dat-nuoc-qua-cd-dau-tay-to-quoc-yeu-thuong-267015/>

<sup>[5]</sup> Interview with the author on November 20, 2019.