

# Sounding Transnationalism: Popular Music in *Paris by Night* and *The Sympathizer*

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## ABSTRACT

As a show that features live cover performances and a nostalgic cabaret aesthetic, and as a form of media often circulated through semi-legal methods, the direct-to-video series starring Vietnamese American singers, *Paris by Night* (1983-present, 134 episodes) necessitates contextualization with other supposedly imitative or derivative artistic productions in subaltern and diasporic communities. Bhaskar Sarkar, Neepta Majumdar, Stuart Cunningham, and Tina Nguyen have rejected the construction that subaltern popular culture operates as an uncreative copy of implicitly white American popular culture. While maintaining this rejection of aspiration towards whiteness, I suggest that the recovery of transnational belatedness does not necessitate eliminating, but rather recentring aspiration and inspiration. While recognizing the ingenuity of popular media phenomena like *Paris by Night*, I shift the focus to participation in transnational flows of media rather than assimilation towards American whiteness through popular media. In *Paris by Night*, and Viet Thanh Nguyen's critique of the show as fictionalized in the 2015 novel *The Sympathizer*, I look through the lens of improvisation to characterize piracy and the cultural copy, as well as the aesthetic and political implications that rise out of their simultaneity. These improvisatory qualities recentre the transnational aspirations of *Paris by Night* in relation to a queer of color global nightlife. I argue that the improvisatory ethos of *Paris by Night* as an example of nostalgic subaltern global media calls attention to the underemphasized link between queer of color aesthetics and subaltern media circulation while necessarily shifting the focus away from a universalized American popular culture.

**Keywords:** media piracy, popular music, queer subculture, Vietnam War

## INTRODUCTION

On a dimly lit stage at the Euromedia Theatre in France, Trizzie Phuong Trinh performs a cover of the disco hit, “Everybody Everybody” (1990) by the Italian house music group, Black Box. Donning a glittery pantsuit like the one in the music video, she performs hitch-kicks and turns, nearly upstaged by the trained dancers behind her clad in black pants and turtlenecks. The technicolor recording suddenly fades to a sepia tone, imitating the glamour of old Hollywood movie screens. Then, Trinh sings in Vietnamese. Rather, she lip-syncs in Vietnamese – as evident by the delayed sound that follows the movement of her mouth and the oddly stable tone of her voice even as she jumps up and down. Like many others at *Paris by Night*, the direct-to-video show hosting Trinh, the performance is a Vietnamese-language cover version of a pre-existing song. While it would be easy to dismiss Trinh’s performance as unoriginal, if not mediocre, the original song is not in itself wholly original. “Everybody Everybody” was one of six songs that led to a copyright lawsuit against Black Box (Newman 2014). The band had recruited the African American singer Martha Wash as a demo artist. Without informing or crediting her, the band has kept her voice in several songs, including “Everybody Everybody.” Trinh’s performance of “Black Box” merely repeats the process of what was already appropriation.

Trinh’s “Everybody Everybody” exemplifies the copycat processes and thus the perception of its larger context, *Paris by Night*, as low brow. The show is part of the phenomenon of transnational media culture trends in the Global South, which notably includes grey and black market circulation of American media and production of supposedly derivative works inspired by past trends in American popular culture. While scholars have rightly pointed to the innovative qualities of what is supposedly subaltern belatedness, the danger of refuting the narrative of the cultural copy altogether risks obscuring the influences from Black American popular culture. At once, Trinh’s performance gestures towards the already mimetic qualities of global pop and the improvisational qualities that precede it as found in the popularization of Black diasporic music as American popular music. The deep history in transnational and American popular music of cultural recirculation, appropriation, and derivativeness blurs the lines between the inventive, the enabling, and the complicit. Either way, these musical strands are bound together by the strategy of implicitly or explicitly citing a sonic referent, riffing on it in playful (and sometimes uncritical) ways.

I will read the show as guided by the principle of improvisation. By rethinking imitation as improvisation, we find not a failed attempt to recreate a reified original, but a potentially critical and creative interpretation that stands alone as an art object in and of itself but nonetheless remains tied to the aesthetic and economic production models of other aesthetic and material global music flows. The production of physical and cultural copies in *Paris by Night* reveals the processual link between what has been understood as mimicry and improvisation, recentring the transnational aspirations of *Paris by Night* in relation to a queer of color global nightlife.

## ORIGINS OF *PARIS BY NIGHT*

The variety show *Paris by Night* features live performances, historical skits, and speeches starring mostly Vietnamese Americans. It is produced by Thuy Nga Productions, pictured in Figure 1, an initially Paris-based company founded in 1963 that has since relocated to Orange County (Cunningham and Nguyen, 81). The company released the first episode of *Paris by Night* in 1983, notably after the Liberation or Fall of Saigon (30 April 1975). The show was created as part of the company's founding mission to produce tape recordings of Vietnamese singers and respond to the growing demand for Vietnamese-language media in post-1975 refugee communities.<sup>1</sup> Like other forms of popular media intended for the working class, especially people of color, *Paris by Night* has been dismissed by American-centric scholars as derivative. This is largely because these media forms tend to explicitly appropriate and borrow from American mainstream media and are often disseminated illegally or semi-legally (Carruthers 135). In particular, *Paris by Night* cites pre-existing media through the performance of cover songs. Like other subaltern media, *Paris by Night* videos largely circulated outside of official economies. Pirated copies could be found in the United States and even in Vietnam, where they were temporarily banned. This claim has been undone by scholars like Tina Nguyen and Stuart Cunningham (1999), and Nhi Lieu (2007), who focus on the role of *Paris by Night* in shaping a sense of Vietnamese diasporic culture. Nguyen, Cunningham, and Lieu mention how the VCR makes possible the construction of a Vietnamese American identity as it is disseminated within the domestic sphere.

While Lieu briefly mentions the grey market circulation of *Paris by Night*, and Cunningham and Nguyen connect this phenomenon to the accessibility of narrowcast media, they do not dwell on the effects of media piracy on their major theme of identity formation. Following scholars of global media culture like Bhaskar Sarkar and Neepa Majumdar, I find that the aesthetics and economics of the show are mutually constituted, operating upon a creative culture of the copy – both physical and cultural. These two elements converge through a focus on the improvisational.

First, existing scholarship on *Paris by Night* focuses on its role as a memory archive and in its capacity to assimilate Vietnamese American people into American popular music. There is a large body of scholarship on alternative memory archives, especially in the work of queer theorists like Jack Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman. Halberstam's framework of queer time "suggest[s] new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but not essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects" (Halberstam 2005, 2). Freeman similarly looks to other nonnormative situations that subvert capitalist time and history.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the 1980s, most Vietnamese refugees consumed Chinese-language media because of their usual inclusion of Vietnamese subtitles and the lack of Asian representation in United States-based media (Nguyen and Cunningham 1999, 82).

Like Freeman, I emphasize the aesthetics of sentimentality and nostalgia in popular performances of queerness. This occurs through the reenactment or referencing of past artistic objects, specifically those that might already be deemed campy. Freeman identifies aesthetic “anachronisms” that are particularly queer, including “Hollywood weepies” and “gold lamé disco shorts” (Freeman 2010, xvii). Queer improvisation largely consists of old Hollywood and disco throwbacks. She draws from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and its “regulated improvisations,” further forming a musical analogy by describing the “rhythms of gift exchange” (4). The particular reenactments of *Paris by Night*, which reference the queer nostalgic Hollywood culture Freeman describes, are especially valent because of their subaltern circulation.

Improvisation is a word that has been taken for granted in queer theory. As I turn to queer theory to understand memory archives and assimilation, it is vital to point out the use of improvisation in cultural studies (particularly in regards to African American popular culture) and the fact that histories of queer subcultures are indebted to Black, queer cultural production. Moten (2003) defines improvisation primarily in relation to Black performance,<sup>2</sup> but also uses the term in a slightly more capacious way, reaching towards these broader solidarities. Moten envisions improvisation throughout his work, including *In the Break* (2003) and *Black and Blur* (2017), as an ideal towards which to strive. Moten lingers on the thematic of improvisation not only as a broad performance technique, but also as a kind of ethos of creativity and futurity that guides everyday performance.

As such, I pivot to formal theories of improvisation as a jazz technique to describe the cover as a form of improvisation. In addition to the queer histories that *Paris by Night* references, these performances are also indebted to traditions of African American popular music. Steven Feld (1996) and T. Carlis Roberts (2011) rightly describe American pop music as a “euphemism” for African American pop music, itself a product of African “cultural material” and “elements from other racial/cultural groups” (Roberts 2011, 23) while still appearing to be “a de facto white genre” (22). Ethnomusicologists, such as Georgina Born et al. (2017) and Christopher Small (1998) have described improvisation as a form of social subversion. While there are some literal examples of improvisation in *Paris By Night*, a parallel, pseudo-mode of improvisation occurs in the form of the cover. Usually, in the most popular form of jazz, musicians riff over a set melody.

Second, through *Paris by Night*, media piracy can be understood as a form of improvisation. Bhaskar Sarkar’s (2016) article, “Media Piracy and the Terrorist Boogeyman: Speculative Potentiations” asserts that subaltern media producers – broadly defined – reconceptualize the category of global media through and by way of piracy. The piratical has been considered parasitic, belated, and mimetic (Serres 2011, Suzuki 2014, Bhabha 1994). Instead, Sarkar finds it to be a source of innovation and creativity.

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<sup>2</sup> “See, black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus – invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation” (Moten 2003, 26).

One principle undergirding South Asian piratical media and media production is *jugaad*, a Hindi term that “refers to quick and resourceful problem solving that fosters a culture of constant improvisation with flexibility, frugality, and simplicity as its keywords” (Sarkar 2016, 358). In this instance, Sarkar borrows the musical term ‘improvisation’ to characterize the do-it-yourself ethos of subaltern media production. Without naming improvisation, other scholars in global media studies have pointed to the unplanned nature and limited resources that often characterize subaltern production. Sarkar’s use of the term comments upon the economic modality, but I will also emphasize its musical connotations to map out the connection between subaltern media as a memory archive and as a mode of transnational cultural production. The physical copying of media through illicit circulation is also a part of queer improvisation, as it creates queer social structures while subverting capitalist production. More specifically, I use improvisation to situate current discussions of piracy.



Figure 1. Producing *Paris by Night*. Source: Thuy Nga Productions

Improvisation foregrounds cultural studies work on African American popular culture as a niche and as subsumed by mainstream American pop culture. Improvisation, a broad umbrella of performance methods especially written about in jazz music, has been extended by Fred Moten (2003) to describe a playful and critical mode of processing history and, as I will show, has been an implicit model in subaltern popular culture. In *In the Break*, Moten hovers on the thematic of improvisation not only as a broad performance technique, but also as a kind of ethos that guides aesthetic expressions of racial identity and anti-imperialist subversion. Improvisation, then, is a term that brings together the transnational modes of material subaltern circulation, the queer Hollywood cultural archives from which it draws, and its relationship to African American popular cultural production, jazz in particular. It ties histories of race in the United States to broader diasporic connections in music and its circulation. The production of physical and cultural copies in *Paris by Night* reveals the processual link between what has been understood as mimicry and improvisation via a queer of color critique.

### **ELABORATIONS ON AESTHETIC AND MATERIAL IMPROVISATION**

Improvisation is a method of performance and criticism that involves interpreting history through a restaging of existing media. By allowing almost-forgotten cultural objects to persist, queer improvisation transmutes cultural objects from static, singular works into ideas that exist in each of their reinterpretation's spanning time. The original object functions similarly to a set of phrases or melodies in a jazz tune, which modulates, shapeshifts, and comes to life again as each instrumentalist riffs on the original melody. New iterations give rise to new artistic ideas, playful twists, and alternative affective frameworks through which a trace of the original remains identifiable. Performers riff on the original art object and challenge the audience to reframe it historically and in terms of gender and race.

Improvisation manifests in four primary ways. First, the performance references an aesthetic of queer camp. Second, queer improvisations of memory occur in the abstract, temporal sense as articulated by Jack Halberstam (2005) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010) in their theorization of queer time. Halberstam articulates queer time to "suggest new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but not essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects" (Halberstam 2005, 2). Queerness for Halberstam not only refers to obviously gay relationships, but other social structures and ways of living that subvert the heterosexual family unit and capitalist modes of production. Halberstam gives the example of Batman and Catwoman in Tim Burton's 1992-film *Batman Returns*, where "they were not man and woman, they were bat and cat, or latex and rubber" (Halberstam 1992). Freeman similarly looks to other nonnormative situations that subvert capitalist time and history.

The processes of improvisation that I identify in *Paris by Night* and its fictionalization in the novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) reveal the potentiality of sentimentality to reframe the influences from which this

iteration of Vietnamese diasporic cultural production draws. First, I describe the nostalgic queer camp of *Paris by Night* and its relationship to queer of color club culture, upon which queer studies scholars like José Esteban Muñoz and Joshua Chambers Letson have usefully elaborated (Letson 2018). Second, I establish the genre of cover performances, which reinterpret songs that have already been performed, as improvisational. Finally, I will assert the relationship between media piracy and queer time with a focus on the new socialities they create.

## VISUAL CAMP AND GENRE THROWBACKS

Beginning with its name, *Paris by Night* overtly references a sentimental aesthetic through the overused trope of Paris as a romantic city. The possibly clichéd strategy of aspiring to the quintessential French city as an aesthetic ideal is further complicated by the subject position of Vietnamese singers, given the history of French colonial rule in Vietnam. Singers perform predominantly Vietnamese-language songs, either in the original Vietnamese or another language, but often enough sing in English and French (and occasionally Spanish). Singers perform a mix of melancholic ballads and upbeat pop songs. In either case, camp is ever-present, as evident in the glitzy garb of the performers in Figure 2. One representative case is Trizzie Phuong Trinh's performance of the disco hit, "Everybody" by the Italian house music group Black Box (Thuy Nga 2020). The technicolor VHS recording fades to a sepia tone, imitating the glamour of old Hollywood movie screens. But the eponymous Paris is not necessarily fixed to its geographical location, and also references nightclub culture in the United States. Not only is Trinh's performance linked both to subaltern and African American house music singers, but one performance of "La vie en rose" seems more instrumentally similar to Grace Jones's version than Edith Piaf's original version. Ý Lan's performance of "La vie en rose" begins with a slow swing rhythm, then transitions to a conga-backed percussive instrumentation. Some of her improvisatory vocal runs are almost identical to those in Grace Jones's recorded version. She sings in a similarly full-bodied and throaty, rather than breathy, voice (Thuy Nga 2020). It is significant that Trinh's performance references Jones's version given that Jones's disco stagings have been regarded as reconfiguring conventional understandings of racialized femininity through her experimental popular performance strategies (Anderson 1993; Keeling 2019; Kershaw 1997; Lobato 2007; Royster 2009). The performance, then, ties her to queer of color aesthetics and innovation in popular music rather than so-called tradition.

The particular kind of camp that has arisen out of the Global South in the 1990s until today was treated with condescension in early scholarly responses and today in popular discourse. Neepe Majumdar (2022) describes the "condescension of Western responses to Indian cinema" in 1980s film reviews (93). The Bollywood films that she addresses highlight the theme of marginality in glitzy pop disco camp, whether it be the racial and ethnic marginality of characters from the Global South or the queer

marginality of gay subcultures (95). Erin Suzuki (2014) argues that the related aesthetic of cheese, which similarly relies on visual excess and lateness, can be critical but can often fall “into a cultural narrative of belatedness” (58). Suzuki uses the example of K-pop singer Psy, whose “Gangnam Style” is a critique of not only South Korean capitalism, but the U.S. capitalist glamour to which it aspires. Its reception in the West obliterated much of the staged critique. Asian American Studies scholar Nhi Lieu (2007), while also attentive to the potentiality of *Paris by Night* as a tool for social bonding, nonetheless frames the aesthetics of the show as “recycled” (205). This term undermines the potential creativity in modernizing already-performed songs; it comes close to the Western condescension that Majumdar describes and certainly falls into the limiting narrative of belatedness that Suzuki articulates.



**Figure 2. Paris By Night 123, 2017. Source: Thuy Nga Productions**

Lieu (2007) portrays *Paris by Night* as a form of hybrid media. While attentive to Vietnamese creativity, she ultimately characterizes the incorporation of American popular music in the show as a form of American assimilation. An important component to *Paris by Night* most often used to illustrate the show’s cultural belatedness is the performance of cover songs. As of now, the scholarship on subaltern circulation still tends to center, even when challenging, white hegemony. Anthropologist Ashley Carruthers (2016) sees *Paris by Night* as part of a trend in Vietnamese music in the 1980s that incorporates what he calls “Western pop” (137). Carruthers describes the “Western-influenced *Tan nhac* (new or modern music) [and] bilingual covers of contemporary American pop songs” performed at music variety shows like *Paris by Night* (124). He establishes the performance of covers as proof of Vietnamese musicians’ aspiration towards a modernity coded white and American (124). Carruthers’ position on Vietnamese American music is part of a more general trend in popular music discourse in which the mainstream obscures the global cultural material from which it draws.

Even Lawrence Lessig (2004), who recognizes the value of some forms of piracy, sees subaltern piracy as derivative. He condemns what he sees as uncreative copying that occurs in Eastern Europe and Asia, which Sarkar (2021) points out furthers a bourgeois and U.S.-centric agenda of good aesthetic taste and creativity. Not ignoring the role of physical piracy in the question of cultural creativity, it is helpful to turn to scholars like Lobato, Sarkar, and Majumdar, who have affirmed the value of grey market material copying and the link between aesthetic imitation and material recirculation. Some scholars, like Arjun Appadurai, have turned to a more transnational perspective, but have nonetheless left out comparative racial contexts from their recovery of cultural borrowing. Despite attempts to untangle subaltern cultural production with ideas of negative belatedness, mimicry, and assimilation towards white hegemony, it is necessary to keep in mind the Black cultural production that has come out of hegemonic nation-states. Scholars who discuss jazz studies, such as T. Carlis Roberts (2011), Fiona Ngo (2014), and Jairo Moreno (2016) remind us of this crucial contradiction, which is why the racialized contexts of improvisation are useful to this discussion.

## CAMP AND QUEER NIGHTLIFE

In addition to examining the economic circulation and audiovisual aesthetics in *Paris by Night*, I now turn to *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel that stages a dialectical critique through the eyes of a Vietnamese Communist double agent undercover in the United States after the fall of Saigon. This central character interweaves the narration of his journey as exile, agent, and refugee with wry commentary on literature, philosophy, and cinema (Prabhu 2018, 388). Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* can be read as a spy novel, Bildungsroman, or Vietnam War narrative. It can also be read as a bricolage of overt and covert cultural references, including the direct-to-video show, *Paris by Night*. As one of few intertextual Vietnamese American references in the novel, *The Sympathizer's* fictionalized form of *Paris by Night* provides insight into its implications as a transnational mode of cultural production. Its fictional version helpfully renders legible the affective dimensions of experiencing *Paris by Night*. While this is a work of fiction, Nguyen's reading of the show provides insight into its affective potentiality, which cannot be fully accounted for by tracing its material circulation and even by analyzing interviews. Nguyen's exaggerated first-hand account of *Paris by Night* more importantly serves as a critique. As one of few scholarly-based works that begins to realize its value, an understanding of *Paris by Night* demands deep engagement with *The Sympathizer*.

While not a central plot device, at least in the first novel of Nguyen's ongoing *Sympathizer* series, a fictionalization and interpretation of *Paris by Night*, serves as a resting place for the narrator. It occupies a taken-for-granted role in the novel as a space of habituation, mirroring the real-life show's gradual and largely understudied impact as a form of Vietnamese American media and popular music video production more broadly. The character and Nguyen himself critique ideology of U.S. capitalism and the

Communist movement in Vietnam, particularly as enacted through culture. Overlooked in readings of Nguyen's dialectical critique are a series of scenes featuring Vietnamese singers performing covers of original songs in cabaret-like venues. The narrator attends these sentimental cabaret performances to drink, cry, and bond with other audience members. Together, the performances reference *Paris by Night*. Popular amongst Vietnamese former refugees but regarded as sappy by some younger generations, the show and its fictional counterpart feature kitschy visual aesthetics, melodramatic ballads, and moralistic commentary by its MCs.

With a focus on popular music production, Nguyen's interpretation of *Paris by Night* in *The Sympathizer* and the show itself challenge the perceived dominance of a homogenous American pop music. Instead, Nguyen's portrayal and the show itself illuminate how Vietnamese performers and audiences adapt and contribute to alternative transnational music trends via improvisation. Vietnamese performers are indeed innovative but they are aspirational – this aspiration is not always to whiteness, but to a mode of resistance characterized by improvisation as interpreted from African American popular cultural production. Nguyen emphasizes the campy aesthetics of *Paris by Night*, unintentionally exposing its relationship to cabarets in the United States – and more broadly, queer of color nightlife and belatedness as a subaltern practice. In this reading, it is important to recall the racialized history of cabarets in the United States. Scholars of club culture, such as Joshua Chambers Letson (2018) in *After the Party*, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) in "Sex in Public," and José Esteban Muñoz (1999) in *Disidentifications* necessarily emphasize that queer subcultures of the 1990s overlap and originate from African American popular culture. In *Scene of the Harlem Cabaret*, Shane Vogel (2009) points to an earlier moment of queer subculture in his exploration of Harlem cabarets.

In *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen pokes fun at the perceived campy belatedness but also finds potential in its impact on social bonds. The narrator attends a revue called *Fantasia* mainly for the purpose of watching a performance by Lana, one of his love interests and the daughter of General of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The dynamics of the scene convey Nguyen's concern for the potential these live performances must proliferate untrue stereotypes of Vietnamese cultural belatedness. The revue takes place at a second-rate, slightly seedy hotel with an aura of old Hollywood kitsch:

Once a swinging establishment on Hollywood Boulevard for celebrities in the black-and-white era, the Roosevelt was now as unfashionable as a silent film star... But the best-dressed people in the hotel appeared to be my fellow countrymen, bedecked in sequins, polyester, and attitude as we headed to the lounge where *Fantasia* waited. (Nguyen 2015, 234)

Seen from the narrator's point of view, the *Fantasia* attendees dress in a manner that is obviously dated and somewhat tacky in its exaggerated formality – much like the audience and performers at *Paris by*

*Night*. In one episode of the live taping, the female co-host wears a polyester-looking dress with a bright 70s-pattern and shiny sequins – an outfit as over-the-top as the ones the narrator describes in the passage quoted above. Many younger generations of Vietnamese Americans reject the show as “kitschy,” in part due to its belated aesthetics and overproduction (Huang 2014). The narrator echoes the derision of these dissatisfied viewers, praising his friends’ apparel ironically and sarcastically referring to their late arrival to “Hollywood’s fashionable moment” (Nguyen 2015, 234).

However, the narrator’s ironic disparagement of his “fellow countrymen” (Nguyen 2015, 234), which alludes to demeaning stereotypes of immigrants as provincial, seems to reveal his self-consciousness and fear of being perceived as a perpetual foreigner. In a way, the narrator’s embarrassment seems to invite solidarity and a form of collective bonding with other Vietnamese American refugees. Despite the distancing implied by his irony, the narrator’s perception of his compatriots’ unfashionable belatedness and their inability to fit in reflects the alienation he faces on a daily basis. Frequently called a “bastard,” (18) yelled at by his superiors, and working in a secretive occupation, the narrator typically represses his feelings of un-belonging to avoid endangering his sense of self and even his life. But the repetition of belated camp through *Paris by Night* vis-à-vis *Fantasia* allows him to confront his alienation. The solidarity made possible by the embarrassment and thrill of camp tempers his out-of-placeness and even produces pleasure.

While mitigating the narrator’s emotional isolation and connecting him with others who share the same racial and cultural marginalization, these live performances do not merely accept perpetual alienation. Nguyen emphasizes the role of costumes in shaping perceptions of gender. Performers can defy gendered expectations through costuming, particularly the roles that Vietnamese people are consigned to in the dominant white, imperialist narrative. For example, Lana chooses to style herself in a way that rejects the Asian female stereotypes she would be confined to in the mainstream culture industry. Lana’s outfit, “a red velvet bustier, a leopard-print miniskirt, black lace gloves, and thigh-high leather boots with stiletto heels,” (Nguyen 237) incorporates 50s cabaret and 60s pop aesthetics. She goes by one name, “like John, Paul, George, Ringo, and Mary” (237). Nguyen includes this elaboration of Lana’s sexy stage persona to set the scene for the narrator’s later flirtation with her, but inadvertently reveals how live performances can challenge normative representation in the memory industry. By inserting herself into Euro- American popular culture, Lana rejects stereotypes of Vietnamese women as victims of war crimes, dangerous Communists, or idealized love interests. In American narratives of the Vietnam War, as the narrator notes, Vietnamese women in modest *áo dài*s (Vietnamese dresses with slits on the side, usually worn over flowy pants) stood in as “implicit metaphor[s] for our country as a whole, wanton and yet withdrawn” (114). Unlike these characters, Lana exercises some degree of control over the ways in which her audiences sexualize her – using this opportunity to style herself in a way that rejects the trope of submissive Asian femininity. She improvises a persona that combines

cabaret sultriness with British pop masculinity, creating a distinct role for herself beyond the shallow archetypes that exist for Asian women in American media.

While Nguyen's portrayal of the narrator's sequin dress and Lana's gender-bent performance reveal the productive possibilities of sentimentality, the narrator does not fully embrace the queer potential of camp. At one performance, the narrator characterizes the song "Black is Black" as the "theme song of riotous Saigonese decadence ... the singer winking over his shoulder à la Mae West" (113). Through the narrator, Nguyen implies that *Paris by Night* is unconsciously understood by its viewers as queer. In his reaction to other live performances, the narrator asserts his heterosexuality in an attempt to dissociate from feminized emotion. Much to the narrator's surprise, "The heterosexually certified bankers and military men absolutely loved him, roaring approval at every flagrant pelvic gesture of flirtation from the singer's extraordinarily tight satin pants" (113). Given the narrator's distrust of what he perceives as material and emotional excess – camp, kitsch, sentimentality – his condescending tone towards the singer, who is obviously coded as gay, is not surprising. The description of the male singer's flirtatious dance style, physically revealing pants, and affectations reminiscent of Mae West, both a woman and gay icon, reinforces stereotypes of gay men as flamboyant, feminine, and over-the-top.

Furthermore, the narrator conflates queerness with decadence, an aesthetic that he then asserts as a metonym for Saigon. The narrator's reaction to the song makes evident his unconscious homophobia. Unlike the "certified heterosexuals" (113) who embrace the singer's performance, even if briefly in a shared moment of abandon that does not really threaten their straight credentials, the narrator cannot bring himself to let down his emotional guard. In the effort to maintain his masculine control at all costs, the narrator appears to miss an opportunity to embrace queer affect as a way to challenge normative heterosexual masculinity. While the narrator should not be conflated with Nguyen, it is clear that Nguyen's portrayal of the queer-coded singer falters between the critical and the enabling. While Nguyen seems to be pointing out the narrator's homophobia, his privileging of masculine disaffectedness throughout the novel limits this critique. Ultimately, this passage indicates how whatever potential arises from the aesthetic of queer camp may be limited by the preconceived notions and sometimes, unconscious homophobia, of its viewers.

## QUEER TIME: TRANSNATIONAL INFLUENCES

Cover performances not only engender queer social relations but use audiovisual techniques to subvert hegemonic popular form. The performance of covers is often cited to illustrate the show's cultural belatedness. Ashley Carruthers (2016) describes the "Western-influenced *Tan nhac* (new or modern music) [and] bilingual covers of contemporary American pop songs" (124) performed at music variety shows like *Paris by Night*. He establishes the performance of covers as proof of Vietnamese musicians'

aspiration towards a modernity coded white and American (124). He acknowledges the appeal to Vietnamese audiences in Communist Vietnam, but primarily because of the supposed allure of its “technical accomplishment, high production values, and cosmopolitan aura” (136). He even argues that diasporic music “demonstrates the failure of national culture to meet consumers’ needs from within local cultural and economic resources” (136–7), presenting an American-centric view that ignores the more complicated conditions of cultural production in Vietnam. These include government instability, economic effects in a post-warzone area, and U.S. monopoly on newly globalized markets. As previously mentioned, Lieu describes the performance of covers as a process of “recycling.” However, she also sees this as an effort to “display the talents of the artists rather than the artistry of the songs themselves” (205).

Beyond simply highlighting the artists, riffing upon older songs can make visible geopolitical and racial intimacies. Lieu cites a performance of the song “America” from *West Side Story* at one performance of *Paris by Night*, describing how it reformulates the song to sound the interconnectedness of racial discrimination and poverty for Vietnamese audiences. She cites this performance as a display of what performers “believe exemplifies American culture to Vietnamese audiences,” (211) still emphasizing the framework of assimilation. Alternately, this instance can also be read as one of many examples of the ways Vietnamese producers insert themselves into broader conversations about communities of color, albeit somewhat clumsily, via a musical widely critiqued for its lack of inclusion of Latinx performers and for perpetuating stereotypes about Puerto Rican immigrants in the United States. This cover performance resituates and improvises creative output about both a Chicana experience and a Vietnamese American experience. Recalling again how Halberstam and Freeman note the importance of alternative socialities and not only explicitly gay relationships as key to queer time, affective bonds across subaltern collectives are included within these alternative socialities.

Bạch Yến, pictured in Figure 3, employs globalized music techniques in her cover of “Malagueña Salerosa” in *Paris by Night 14*, similarly forging affective intimacies outside of the Vietnamese and American binary (Thuy Nga 2020). To do this, Yến employs vocal techniques common amongst singers of rancheros and boleros said to produce extreme emotion. “Malagueña Salerosa” is a Huapango song in which the singer addresses his *niña hermosa*, or beautiful girl, proclaiming his desire and lamenting that she has refused his love. Latin American Studies scholars Vanessa Knights and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes note the popularity of unrequited love and unfulfilled desire in Latin American and Mexican *canciones rancheras* and *boleros rancheros*, commonly associated with the musical aesthetic of *filin*. A technique used to produce this aesthetic is *portamento*, “the lengthening of syllables at the end of the phrase” (Knights 2013, 87).

In addition to using this technique, Yến sings in a husky timbre and low register. These are stylistic

choices characteristic of bolero singers like La Lupe and Chavela Vargas. Knights sees the genre of rancheros as opening up space for ambiguous gender performance.



Figure 3. Bạch Yến, 1991. Source: Thuy Nga Productions.

Following this performative potentiality, Yến sings a song that is traditionally understood as a ballad for a man to sing to a woman and does not change the feminine pronouns of the ballad's addressee. While stylistically different, it is easy to see how these genres of music confluence with other songs commonly performed at *Paris by Night*, including more traditional Vietnamese songs called *Cải Lương* (Hải 2001). As musicologist Hải notes, themes of absent love are also popular in Vietnamese popular music during and after the Vietnam War. Vocalists who sing more traditional Vietnamese music employ similar techniques that imply emotional excess. Yến emphasizes this commonality to her audience, pausing during a musical interlude to paraphrase the lyrics in Vietnamese. As musicologist Jairo Moreno (2016) notes, the violence of the U.S. empire and racial relations made possible a global market for Latin American music as well as for American jazz heavily influenced by Latin American music (138). Performances like Yến's, which borrow from other global folk music traditions, point to the hybridity of Vietnamese popular music that circumvents the American-Vietnamese binary. Rather than assimilate to American whiteness, the performance reveals the global music trends upon which American pop music depends, and asserts Vietnamese participation amongst these trends. The performance has the potential to reveal what Lisa Lowe refers to as the affective intimacies between continents, as shared musical motifs of absent love and tragedy reflect shared pasts of war and empire (Lowe 2015).

Improvisation is not always recuperative. Sometimes, it is inextricably entangled with white-coded queerness in American popular culture and the dehistoricized hybridity of American popular music. Nguyen admits that some *Paris by Night* performances do in fact simplify and even obscure historical

contexts. *West Side Story* (1957) is itself a musical that capitalizes upon the imperial archive of Latin American rhythms in popular American jazz (Moreno 2016). Other *Paris by Night* performances rearrange Vietnamese and Euro-American pop songs by adding or exaggerating similar musical stylings appropriated from Latin American folk and jazz. In his article for *The Diplomat*, Dinh Duy (2016) writes about the popularity of pre-1975 *bolero* songs amongst Vietnamese singers, who even perform on specialized Vietnamese language shows like *Solo with Boléro* and *Boléro Idol*. While these trends have been widely discussed on Vietnamese websites, scholarship on Vietnamese popular music overlooks these linkages in favor of a more linear process of Americanization. The focus on United States cultural production ignores the presence of other global music trends both in *Paris by Night* and Euro-American music.

One song frequently performed is “Khi Xưa Ta Bé,” with Vietnamese lyrics composed by Pham Duy. It was performed in *Paris by Night* episodes 63, 95, 108, and in an International Dance Special episode. This is a cover performance of “Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down),” an American pop ballad first performed by Nancy Sinatra. Two performances remove even the romantic sadness of the original song to project an illusion of multi-ethnic harmony. In Mai Tiến Dũng and Hương Giang’s performance of “Khi Xưa Ta Bé” in *Paris by Night 95*, the two singers are accompanied by two acoustic guitarists who employ flamenco-style strumming and improvisational flourishes, two background vocalists exercising call-and-response singing techniques, and a conga drummer. Tú Quyên’s version in *Paris by Night 63* employs a more generic hybrid pop instrumentation with a still recognizably Latin string motif (Thuy Nga 2021, *LK Khi Xưa Ta Bé*). More noticeable are the flamenco-inspired dresses that Tú and her female backup dancers wear and the Latin ballroom steps that they perform. These tropes contribute to what Nguyen sees as forgetting the traumas of the past. In these cases, the productive potential of improvising as a critical performance method is overshadowed by the tendency in American popular music to remove global music from historical contexts (Roberts 2011).

While Viet Thanh Nguyen is similarly wary of the potential dehistoricizing performances of *Paris by Night*, his interpretation of a “Bang Bang” cover can be viewed through a more hopeful lens. The narrator in *The Sympathizer* notes that Lana, the performer and his love interest, sings in French, Vietnamese, and English, citing lines from Pham Duy’s Vietnamese version. In his account of her performance, the narrator muses:

All I wanted was to immolate myself in a night with her to remember forever ... [Lana] had grown up in a city where gangsters were once so powerful the army fought them in the streets. Saigon was a metropolis where grenade attacks were commonplace, terror bombings not unexpected, and wholesale invasion by the Viet Cong a communal experience. What did Nancy Sinatra know when she sang *bang bang*? To her, those were

bubble-gum pop lyrics. *Bang bang* was the sound track of our lives. (Nguyen 2015, 237-8)

A multilingual cover that emphasizes tragedy and melodrama, this fictionalization closely resembles Thanh Lan's renowned 1989-version of "Khi Xưa Ta Bé." The similarity between her name and Lana's is no coincidence; Lan is a frequent *Paris by Night* performer in the predominant genre of tragic ballads. In his reimagination, Nguyen presents the trilingual "Bang Bang" not as an imitation of Sinatra's, but an emotional and historical upgrade. He describes images of war to set the scene for a more concrete reference. Imagining immolating himself, the narrator tacitly alludes to Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation in protest of the U.S.-supported Diem-government. The narrator experiences a historical, collective emotion, describing how Lana transforms the song about two lovers into one about war. In the narrator's eyes, it is the so-called original that is merely cute and shallow. Compared to Sinatra's "bubble-gum pop lyrics," Lana's "sound track of our lives" holds a deeper historical and affective meaning.

The narrator calls Lana's version "the enigmatic story of two lovers who, regardless of having known each other since childhood, or because of knowing each other since childhood, shoot each other down ... *Bang bang* was the sound of memory's pistol firing into our heads, for we could not forget love, we could not forget war, we could not forget lovers, we could not forget enemies, we could not forget home, and we could not forget Saigon" (238). Lana's rendition is a story about lovers turned enemies during war. Pushed to its most literal context, "Bang Bang" in the context of Saigon could be taken as a love song about star-crossed lovers from ARVN and Viet Cong forces. Because many families were separated as they migrated across the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel in accordance with their political stance, it was in fact common for members of the same family to fight on different sides of the war. Lana's performance alludes not to a pre-war Saigon, but a Saigon where the borders between home and war, lovers and enemies become indistinguishable. Lana's performance rehistoricizes "Bang Bang," making it into a song about the Vietnam War rather than simply a song about two (presumably heterosexual) lovers who, in their youth, played a childhood game with imaginary guns.

### **QUEER TIME: THE MATERIAL COPY**

Challenging the assumption that these habits of media circulation and production reiterate imperialist formations of an advanced United States and belated Global South, much has been written about the potential for popular subaltern media to reframe U.S. cultural production and for grey market circulation to subvert the normative economy. Less has been written about how these alternate media structures and economies are part of the aesthetic process. First of all, covers were especially popular because copyrights were rarely enforced (Lieu 2007, 205). Secondly, these reframed narratives that

emerged out of *Paris by Night* performances copying and revising older narratives proliferate as material copies in non-normative ways.

The show's predominant circulation amongst pirate economies can be linked to the perceived aesthetic failure of cover performances like Trinh's that produce what has been described by scholars as a culture of leisure (De Kosnik 2016, Radway 1991, Modleski 2008). What are the affective dimensions of this show that allow it to be consumed as a product of leisure, and what existing leisure cultures does it draw from? How does the issue of aesthetic belatedness relate to the literally late physical copy? The show is, after all, embroiled in both creative borrowing and illicit economic practices. This calls attention to the supposed original nature of the media from which Vietnamese diasporic media explicitly draws. Lai stated in an interview with Carolyn Valverde, "After working all day, they [*Viet Kieu*, or overseas Vietnamese] want to be able to sing, dance, whatever, in the evening. *Paris By Night* is based on the desire for this type of leisure distraction" (2003). Lai alludes to the working conditions that Vietnamese diasporic communities faced; after leaving Vietnam, many were unable to find work, took on employment below their skill level, or endured harsh working conditions. In light of this economic precarity as well as the recent trauma of war, Lai envisioned *Paris by Night* as a space of relaxation and freedom from the bounds of time.

The transition from VHS to DVD copying was part of a larger trend in Vietnam and Asian media circulation more broadly. Vivencio Ballano (2016) traces the different kinds of media piracy, which includes primarily the circulation of cassettes and videotapes in the 1980s, CDs and VCDs in the 1990s and early 2010s, and DVD and digital files after the 2010s (230). The implications of these kinds of media circulation are twofold. First of all, the risky improvisational practice of bootlegging DVDs created new social forms and ways of disseminating information. In his article, "Piracy on the Ground," Tony Tran (2015) refers to pirate DVD stores in Vietnam as "affordable and efficient site[s] of access" (56) where consumer networks elide regulations like zoning, taxes, and censorship instilled by United States culture industries and legal bodies. Working undercover as an employee at a pirate DVD shop, Tran recalls the unusual ways that the DVDs were organized. He writes, "In many ways becoming an informal archive, these categories show the history of popular culture in Hanoi and illustrate how audiences in Vietnam frame and request media" (63). Since "many of the workers were cinephiles" with knowledge of global film histories, they could deftly help customers navigate the "seemingly random organization ... by combining their knowledge of films and the underworkings of the pirate distribution system with their own created organization system" (63). Each store was curated with their own customer base in mind; sometimes, films were arranged by actor, sometimes by popularity, and at other times without a clear logic to anyone besides the store owner. This extreme sense of locality created new social intimacies. By resituating *Paris by Night* amongst other global films, pirate circulators pushed against the regional and genre norms of media organizing. These pirate sites

situated *Paris by Night* within a larger, more flexible global imaginary while also allowing recombinant media to reach small localities.

Tran (2015), however, notes that the act of physical piracy is disappearing not just in Vietnam, but throughout the world (77). As Ballano reminds, this is largely due to the rise of digital media. But this, too, questions the temporality of *Paris by Night* as simply living in the past. Because of the rise of digital media and digital piracy, *Paris by Night* was able to find a way to raise Thuy Nga's revenues, even if only slightly. In response to the rise of piracy websites in Vietnam, Thuy Nga decided to put most of the *Paris by Night* videos online (Roosevelt 2015). *Paris by Night* videos, then, travel along various circuits. Now, they are available on VCR, DVD, and on the Internet. Those who watch the show can communicate at legal DVD outlets, bootleg shops, and in YouTube comment sections. While the show itself may seem to be stuck in the past, its material circulation propels its ideas into the future and helps sustain affective networks amongst Vietnamese diasporic community members. These affective networks rest upon nostalgia for fantasies real and made-up, both about Vietnam and the United States. The piratic and imitative qualities of cultural belatedness link *Paris by Night* to nostalgia. It is true that this nostalgia can be merely expressed via poor imitations or degraded copies, but recognizing these practices as improvisation recognizes their mutable impact based on audience and temporality.

This sense of geographic and ethnic identity convinces some participants in *Paris by Night* to care less about its illicit circulation. First of all, the show continues to spend millions of dollars on production with revenue barely or not at all covering the costs. Singer Quang Le's pirated music videos have reached over 80 million views, yet she says, "Not everything is about money." She adds, "We want to focus on the art ... We want to make that heritage last. We want to show our audience how beautiful, how treasured these songs are" (Roosevelt 2015). The emotions generated by *Paris by Night* seem to resolve the economic risk involved, so that even those who work on the show seem to prioritize what is gained emotionally rather than economically. Recently retired *Paris by Night* MC Nguyen Ngoc Ngan writes, "I couldn't return to Vietnam, so I wanted my dad to see me after 10 years abroad. Thúy Nga shows are pirated [in Vietnam] a lot, so there's a high chance that he will see me and hear me talk" (Kornhaber 2010). Ngan sees media piracy as something that enables a connection with his father. Whether by emphasizing new routes of affective communication like Ngan or describing their creative work as a kind of sacrifice like Le, participants of the show put nostalgia for the past in conversation with the future – rebuilding family ties and creating new ties with younger generations.

It is thus that the piratical circulation of these music videos saves them from simply being voyeuristic pleasure from the Western gaze. Recalling now the transition from physical to digital media circulation, it is important to note that even piratical forms of media circulation, especially in music, retain power dynamics. Ethnomusicologist David Novak (2011) describes the process in which, during this media transition, record companies began re-releasing world music with the ideal of informational freedom,

open access, and open source in mind. The record companies Novak cites as responsible for the circulation of World Music are predominantly U.S. based, and owned by white Americans. Novak helpfully asks, "What are the ethical and ideological goals of constructing 'new old' media in the present confluence of digital, analog, physical, and virtual forms?" (606) It is clear that, because of the identity of the old media and those reviving it, this question is deeply entrenched in matters of race and empire. After acknowledging the potential productiveness of these open-source companies, Novak problematizes the fraught politics of cultural preservation and admits that "this notion of informational freedom could only emerge in a US-based social context that has historically foregrounded the legal rights of independent liberal subjects" (618, 623).

In contrast to these physical forms of media, which at their worst usurp source materials from the Global South to redistribute media to the intellectual academe of imperial centers, videos like *Paris by Night* work in reverse, disseminating new combinations of 'American' popular music and versions of folk Vietnamese music (Novak 2011, 623). This is only possible because of the combination of economic risk and perceived creative safety. By performing covers instead of simply creating new recordings of the original singers' performances, or instead of creating new songs entirely, Thuy Nga puts older music in conversation with futurity. There exists a kind of contrapuntal dialogue between old and new, Vietnamese and American, safe and dangerous.

In conclusion, it is helpful to turn to the words of Bappi Lahiri, who Majumdar quotes in her discussion of the Bollywood film *Disco Dancer* (1982) and accusations of plagiarism. Lahiri asks, "Tell me, who doesn't copy these days? You are original till you are exposed. How can you create something out of nothing?" (qtd. in Majumdar 2022, 93). Returning to "Everybody Everybody," it is clear that Trinh's performance is not any more imitative than the source material that it copies. Perhaps not as intentionally political as the restaging of "West Side Story" or even the restaging of "Bang Bang," Trinh's performance nonetheless illustrates the potentiality of revisiting mainstream popular music once it has passed its prime. Bypassing copyright laws and proliferated via pirate networks, this new "Everybody Everybody" is not simply in poor taste. Like the rest of *Paris by Night* performances, it recontextualizes and returns a source material already exposed for its derivative qualities within a Vietnamese context. An Italian song whose band coopted the voice of an African American singer, "Everybody Everybody" is no longer a covertly usurped piece of media, but one that exposes its own status as a copy. And in this case, the copy can proliferate outside the often-repressive circuits of the U.S. culture industry.

## CONCLUSION

The recirculation of popular music in *Paris by Night*, both through cover performances and through its

grey market circulation, mobilizes queer aesthetics and temporality to subvert popular culture norms. By insisting upon living in the past in different ways, material and creative copying in *Paris by Night* recontextualize existing media with other histories and ensure their proliferation in new geopolitical contexts. They dispel presumptions about American cultural imperialism and recognize that the cultural hegemony of the United States rests upon Black and Latin American cultural production. Finally, improvisation pushes against the binary relationship of Vietnamese and white American cultural production, bringing it back to queer of color nightlife.

In this article, I have used improvisation as a framework to analyze the piratical circulation and performance of cover songs in the Vietnamese diasporic show, *Paris by Night*, arguing that improvisation exposes the linkages between Vietnamese media production and other global popular cultures outside of American popular music. Methodologically, improvisation aligns this essay with cultural studies frameworks that attend to race in popular culture, particularly U.S. popular culture and its global flows. While current scholarship still emphasizes assimilation by framing *Paris by Night* and other diasporic popular media as not assimilatory, this framework implicitly presumes the predominance of white hegemonic popular culture.

Instead, improvisation as theory emphasizes the pervasiveness of African American and Black diasporic cultural production in global music cultures as a whole. Improvisation also recognizes the often problematic appropriation of these forms of musical production. Using improvisation to characterize *Paris by Night* also recombines other global music genres, such as boleros and disco. The cheesiness of *Paris by Night* performances does not derive from unsuccessful imitation, but a generative (while sometimes uncritical) improvisation upon multiple global music flows. The *Paris* in *Paris by Night* is deceptive. Like other scholars have argued, the performers and producers of this show and other low-budget, low-brow productions are both imitative and innovative. But conceptualizing imitation as improvisation reframes *Paris by Night* within a queer of color global pop imaginary rather than the outmoded Western/Eastern binary.

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