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Cathy Truong
Macalester College, ctruong@macalester.edu

Keywords:

Vietnamese-American, nails, art, American Dream, Vietnam War, Black-American

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Polishing the American Dream: Vietnamese-Americans in the Nail Industry

By Cathy Truong

Abstract

Nail art is a site of cultural history in the US. This form of artistic and self expression has evolved greatly over the decades, with influences from different cultures and backgrounds, especially from Black-American and Vietnamese-American people. Growing up, it had never occurred to me why so many of my Vietnamese relatives and family friends worked as nail technicians. Turns out, over the years Vietnamese-Americans immigrants turned entrepreneurs have actually come to dominate this multi-billion dollar industry. But I had never taken my family members' careers as nail techs seriously, and it seems that this is a popular opinion among many Americans. Jokes are often made about nail technicians, never without including ignorant "Asian" accents. Not only this, but many technicians face blatant disrespect, verbal and even physical abuse, and racism at their work or outside work. These instances of racism are a part of a larger, white-supremacist and imperialist issue of the US enacting violence onto Vietnamese bodies since the Vietnam War until today. They also essentialize Vietnamese-Americans into dehumanizing stereotypes, erasing their identity and complex history. Using nail art as a site of exploration, we can investigate more about the Vietnamese American working class experience, the history of the Vietnam War and critiques of the American Dream, the complex relationship between Vietnamese-American and Black-American communities, and finally how nail art has grown in such creative and beautiful ways.

Keywords:

Vietnamese-American, nails, art, American Dream, Vietnam War, Black-American

Author Biography:

Cathy (kiều my) Trương is non-binary Vietnamese-American artist born and raised in Kansas. They are a senior American Studies major at Macalester College. And they love dancing and being an Aquarius.

Further Reading

Nail art by Vietnamese non-binary artist Mandy Retseko:



Retseko, Mandy. 2021. Trinkitz.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CTNlvzSIRjV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

Vietnamese nail tech Coca Michelle made this set called “Mars” for famous rapper Megan Thee Stallion:

Michelle, Coca. Mars. 2021. V I S U A L P O E T. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUP83corbxj/>.

A documentary from NPR about how Vietnamese Americans took over the nail industry:

Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. "How Vietnamese Americans Took Over The Nails Business: A Documentary." NPR, 19 May 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/19/724452398/how-vietnamese-americans-took-over-the-nails-business-a-documentary>.

Queer poet Ocean Vuong's poignant work about his experiences growing up Vietnamese-American and spending a lot of time in his family's nail salon:

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2021.

Anti-Black racism in the Asian community, specifically from an instance where Asian nail salon owners assaulted a Black woman and her family:

Tso, Tiffany Diane. "Nail Salon Brawls & Boycotts: Unpacking The Black-Asian Conflict In America." *Refinery 29*, August 21, 2018. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/08/207533/red-apple-nails-brawl-black-asian-conflict>.

Phường Trần Nguyên's book about the "contentious relationship Vietnamese Americans have with their adopted homeland," how Vietnamese-Americans became model minorities the U.S., the country guilty of destroying their land and people:

Nguyen, Phuong Tran. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017.