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Reflections of Black, and Vietnamese-Immigrant History in Acrylic Nails:

The decoration of nails has historically been linked with class, specifically one's ability to grow and maintain naturally long nails, and afford the frivolous expenses of decorating them as a signifier that they are above the laboring class, making this practice and aesthetic associated with the upper class at its points of origin. However in mid-20th century America, the invention of acrylic for nails, and the innovation of Black women and Vietnamese immigrants gave rise to long, decorated nails as a distinctively Black, working class aesthetic. Focusing primarily on the period between 1975 and 2000, the goal of this paper is to look at the acrylic manicures we see on hands around us as an artifact that reflects the history of their development, both physically and socially, through their use by Black women as a medium to create a visual representation of Black femininity that defies the dominant cultural construction of femininity from which they have historically been excluded, and their use by Vietnamese immigrants as a vehicle for entrepreneurship and the building of an ethnic labor niche. All of these histories are reflected in the artifact that is acrylic nails.

Credited with the invention of nail polish, Ancient China is responsible for one of the earliest practices of nail decoration, dating back to 3000 BC (Fetto 2021). At this time

women would soak nails in a mix of egg whites, gelatine, beeswax, and dyes made from flower petals to create, “Long, coloured talons – usually worn with highly decorative nail guards created with hammered brass sheets inlaid with semi-precious stones – [that] were an indication of wealth and social status. The assumption was that you could not possibly have such nails if you were of a lower class. Field work and 15cm talons do not coexist well,” (Fetto 2021). Similarly, the practice of nail adornment in ancient Egypt, dating back to approximately 3100 BCE-30 BCE, was also associated with the society’s upper class. The dying of nails using henna, and decoration with hieroglyphics and precious metals was most prevalent among pharaohs and their families to create opulent and extravagant displays of wealth, that also signified their elevated status from which they would never have to use their hands for labor (Nicholls 2023).

Through this inherently incongruent relationship between manual labor and naturally long nails, and the lack of accessibility of manicure services to the working class, the practice of wearing long nails was pretty exclusive to the upper class until a dentist named Frederick Slack used dental acrylic to fix his broken nail in the 1950s, leading to the invention of acrylic for nails, which he was credited with (Nails Mag. 2012). The two-part system using acrylic powder and monomer to create extended false nails that emerged in the 1970s brought with it a shift in the demographics long nails were accessible to, both in terms of price and utility. Acrylic nails are much stronger and less likely to break than natural nails of the same length, so durable that this invention made it possible for working class women to begin wearing their nails long, with the support of the acrylic bond making their long nails much more congruent with manual labor.

Acrylic nails were also made accessible to working class women through prices which were kept low through the use of immigrant labor in nail salons, specifically the labor of Vietnamese immigrants, which brings us to the creation of an ethnic niche in nail care by Vietnamese immigrants to America. In the 2 decades following the Fall of Saigon, which ended the Vietnam War in 1975, over 3 million people fled Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, over 1 million of whom found refuge in the United States (Roos 2021). The story goes that the creation of an ethnic niche in nails by Vietnamese immigrants was set in motion by American actress Tippi Hedren when she was working as an international relief coordinator at Food for the Hungry, helping refugees find employment. Hedren's manicured nails caught the eyes of the Vietnamese women she was working with, giving her the idea to train them in the art of nail care (Morrison 2019). Hedren followed through, "flying in her own personal manicurist along with additional support from a beauty school to teach 20 women the art of nails. She is also credited with helping them become properly licensed and find gainful employment in nail salons throughout Southern California," (Morrison 2019). So this marks the beginning of the connection between Vietnamese immigrants and the nail industry, but how did it grow into today's full-on ethnic niche where over 50% of U.S. nail salon employees are Vietnamese? (Morrison 2019).

In their 2011 "The Making and Transnationalization of an Ethnic Niche: Vietnamese Manicurists," Susan Eckstein and Thanh-Nghi Nguyen explore how Vietnamese immigrants, specifically women, developed an employment niche as manicurists in U.S. urban areas. In this article, they demonstrate the roles of networking amongst Vietnamese-Americans and immigrants, the availability of training and exams in Vietnamese, and the strategic opening of salons in areas with little competition, and

offering unique services, in the creation of a Vietnamese ethnic niche in nails. Eckstein and Nguyen cite the tendency of Vietnamese salon owners to hire co-ethnic employees, often recruiting through friends and family, from Vietnamese training schools, and with help from the Vietnamese media which provides relevant industry and employment information that is not available to non-Vietnamese speakers, also referencing a 2007 survey of Vietnamese salon owners and employees that concluded 70% of Vietnamese manicurists prefer to read in Vietnamese (Eckstein, Nguyen 659).

Additionally, the authors discuss the advantage the availability of training and exams in Vietnamese, but not in the native languages of other immigrant groups looking for employment in this area of the beauty industry requiring the least formal training (Eckstein and Nguyen 650), creates for non-English-speaking Vietnamese immigrants over other non-English-speaking immigrant groups, before even getting to the point of seeking employment in nail salons. They cite the significant increase in the number of Vietnamese registered manicurists following the 1996 introduction of a Vietnamese language version of the licensing exam in California, the U.S. state with the largest Vietnamese population (Eckstein, Nguyen 657). However, the concentration of Vietnamese people in the nail industry is made an ethnic niche by its existence across states with both large and small Vietnamese populations (Eckstein, Nguyen 649).

This dominance of Vietnamese manicurists across the states is due to the practice of moving to areas with less competition to open salons, a practice so common among Vietnamese manicurists it inspired a phrase in the Vietnamese lexicon: “Lam mong xuyen bang” or “doing nails across states,” in English (Babcock 2017). A key part of this practice, especially in the niche’s early days, was its targeting of working class, majority-Black and

Latine neighborhoods, groups and areas with little access to professional nail services prior to the arrival of Vietnamese nail salons — nail services were previously made inaccessible by the price of non-immigrant labor and the availability of these services only at less specialized salons in wealthy majority-white neighborhoods. Vietnamese manicurists also sought to set up shop in these areas to avoid the race and class-based discrimination experienced by their peers serving majority-white clientele in wealthy areas (Hoang 118, 121). Eckstein and Nguyen describe the emergence of specialized nail service-only salons as a, "...transformation of nailwork into what might be called McNails, entailing inexpensive, walk-in, impersonal service, in stand-alone salons, nationwide, and by making manicures and pedicures de riguer across class and racial strata," (Eckstein and Nguyen 639). With this transformation of nailwork taking place in working-class Black and Latine neighborhoods came nail art and decoration services that were not offered by the full-service salons in wealthy white neighborhoods, making these services and aesthetics unique to Vietnamese nail salons and the groups they served. However, it is important to note that innovations made in these Vietnamese salons, such as the adoption of larger brushes to work more efficiently, have become the standard practice across salons today, marking the significance of the labor of Vietnamese immigrants in shaping the nail industry, (Eckstein and Nguyen 655).

Although the production of culture by Black women through acrylic nails cannot be traced through statistics in the same way as the development of the Vietnamese ethnic niche, nail designs themselves and the anti-Black discrimination linked to the practice can be used to track it through time. Supermodel Donyale Luna's 1966 appearance on the cover of Vogue marked both the first time a Black woman held that position, and the state of

acrylic nails at that time. In this iconic image she is shown wearing a set of fairly short, plain white acrylics, done before the 'McNailification' of acrylic manicures which followed the Fall of Saigon in 1975 (Boulevard 2021). In 1966 professional manicures were still only accessible to the wealthy, which we can see here through their presence on the cover of Vogue and their reflection of dominant culture's ideas of appropriate femininity through their length, color, and lack of decoration. Even prior to the practice of wearing long acrylic nails emerged, Black women had been stigmatized for wearing bright nail colors which were deemed overly sexual and trashy, especially in red (Pieper 2015). Because of this, Luna's all white set signifies the beginning of the expression of Black femininity through acrylic nails, while still fitting within the beauty standards of a publication centered around white feminine aesthetics. The lack of decoration and adornment on her nails also provides a time stamp for the photo as before the use of acrylics to create a distinctively working class expression of Black femininity.

Once the practice of wearing long acrylics, decorated in the styles revolutionized by Vietnamese manicurists, had been adopted by Black women of America's working class, Florence Joyner entered the spotlight as the fastest woman in the world, however a disproportionate amount of the attention she received was for her nails. The length, shape, and designs of her nails marked this point in time as after the establishment of acrylic nails as real estate for the expression of Black femininity, but this is also evidenced by the discrimination leveled against her, which had clear roots their association with Blackness and the working class, deviating from societally accepted expressions of femininity. One author examining this reaction described this, writing, "…regardless of intention, French manicures and pastel colors signal white, middle-class, heteronormative beauty. Long, sculptured, airbrushed nails, on the other

hand, are markers of blackness, sexual deviancy, and marginalized femininity. Writers highlighted Flo-Jo's fingernails as both a source of intrigue and revulsion, subtly emphasizing racial differences. Because she preferred long, colorful nails, the runner was depicted as abnormal, deviant, and different. While blackness was never explicitly mentioned in such accounts, the focus on her nails normalized whiteness," (Pieper 2015). Joyner's colorfully painted and ornately adorned nails constituted a resistance to America's long history of using a normative femininity rooted in white supremacy and eurocentricity to deny Black women access to womanhood, which resulted in negative reactions by many white people who recognized Joyner's act of defiance, especially on such a large stage as the Olympics, as a threat to the white supremacy supporting their position of power over Black people — Joyner had questioned the ability of white society to force aesthetic conformity on Black women. These reactions came in the form of insults that, really, just give credit to the working class Black women behind this cultural aesthetic, but in tones hoping to demonize Blackness and poverty, which still exist today. For example, the style of nails worn by Joyner were and are referred to negatively as "ghetto," a term linked with race and class in its colloquial use and intended to demonize both, but also reflective of the style's origins with working class Black women. Acrylic nails are also commonly called out as "unprofessional," which reflects both the ancient history of long nails as incongruent with the workplace, and the speaker's adoption of anti-Black sentiments that perceive Black women as inherently unprofessional or undeserving of dignified labor. This type of stereotyping also served as an attempt by the dominant culture to shame Black women into conforming to femininity as defined by whiteness.

In her 2006 paper, "Put Your Hands Up! You're Beautiful!," Ilgin Yorukoglu discusses acrylic manicures as a cultural practice and performance used to maintain one's distinction in

society, specifically a sub-group differentiating itself from dominant culture through aesthetics (Yorukoglu 55). With the practice of wearing decorated acrylics connected to such a distinct sub-group, resulting from their use by Black women to create a visual expression of norm-defying Black femininity, and their availability primarily in working class Black and Latine neighborhoods, due to the practice of "Lam mong xuyen bang" by Vietnamese manicurists, along with the condemnation of these acrylics by dominant society, the sub group is differentiated by their perception of the nails. Yorukoglu explains, "...the aesthetic that is attributed to fake nails does not carry a universal characteristic. The pleasure that is gained through the consumption of an object, in this case the fake nails, is a mere social judgment," (Yorukoglu 60). Acrylic nails are a visual representation of Black culture practiced and reproduced by Black women and the communities surrounding them — people included in the sub-group who are not necessarily Black, but share ties to the origins of the practice through their proximity to Blackness. For example, the rise of Vietnamese nail salons took place in majority-Black and Latine neighborhoods, where cultural exchange due to physical proximity and shared circumstances included the sharing of cultural practices, such as wearing acrylics, that can now be used to identify members of the sub-group. In my personal experience, I once saw this play out when a white woman wearing long, colorful acrylics was asked if she was from "the hood" due to her performance of belonging to the sub-group associated with both this practice and stereotyped as "hood." She was not, but her adoption of the cultural practice functioned to differentiate her from normative white beauty standards, giving her the appearance of belonging to the sub group.

In her 2021 article, "Nail Art Is More Than a Style Statement It's Black History and Culture," *The Cut* fashion and beauty writer, Asia Milia Ware, brings in pairs of Black nail artists

and clients to discuss what acrylic nails mean to them, getting into their importance to the wearers as a visual expression of their culture. Nail artist, Tahsiyn Harley, describes her work as translating the stories Black women have to tell onto their nails, she says, “Black people are not a monolith [...] We are vibrant and colorful and bold [and] we express our styles in so many beautiful ways. Nails are a way of making a statement and rebellion against mainstream beauty standards surrounding Black women,” (Ware 2021). Nail artist, Gina Edwards, also expresses her enjoyment of telling stories through her work, saying, “Nail culture has been the driving force for out-of-the-box creativity, and Black women don’t do simple [...] We elevate and we create with vibrancy,”(Ware 2021). Ware herself also reflects on dominant culture’s acceptance (or co option) of the look in recent years, writing, “Google ‘Who started the long nail trend?’ and Kylie Jenner is often the first result — a fact that would be laughable if it weren’t so insulting. For years, long nails were deemed ‘ghetto’ by many outside of the Black community, and the nail styles born in the Black community aren’t a trend — they’re a part of our history and culture,” (Ware 2021).

Although the stigmatization of this style of acrylic nails continues on today, the industry behind them has changed significantly in the last 10 or so years, following the popularization of Hip-hop music in dominant American culture and the platforming of Black women that came with it. The vast majority of women in Hip-hop, especially rappers, can be seen wearing acrylic nails often in long, ornate, vibrant styles that pay homage to the widely uncelebrated women responsible for the creation of this form of expression and resistance. They also are used by now-wealthy Black celebrities, like Cardi B who grew up working class (Decker et al. 2020), as a symbol of their continued unity with working class Black women and belonging in the sub-group. The wearing of these styles by wealthy people has created demand for high-end

celebrity nail techs who specialize in designs inspired by the 'McNails' innovated by Vietnamese manicurists, but now at a much higher cost. For example, one set of Cardi B's nails reportedly cost $1000 in 2018, and the prices are only going up (Robin 2018). The platforming of these styles, through their famous wearers, has created demand for this type of manicure service among anyone who can afford the prices, regardless of their relationship to the original sub-group, flipping the historical working class association of this style of nails on its head. Additionally, the dominance of Vietnamese immigrants in the nail industry does not seem to have translated into this new iteration that is nail techs, but it is still a highly gendered job associated with entrepreneurship. I personally believe this is due to the English language skills and social capital Kimberly Kay Hoang discusses as being integral for employment in high-end nail services, and has historically barred Vietnamese immigrants from working in American-owned high-end salons serving clients who expect the emotional labor of conversation with their nail services, however this has yet to be studied (Hoang 128-130).

Regardless of who wears or does them, the long, decorated acrylic nails we see today are a reflection of the people responsible for shaping them. The wearers will always be following in the footsteps of the Black women who popularized the practice, and the nail artists will always be a part of an industry revolutionized by Vietnamese immigrant labor. Acrylic nails represent resistance against normative white beauty standards by Black women and celebrate Black femininity. Acrylic nails are also a symbol of the history of Vietnamese-American entrepreneurship and the Vietnamese immigrant experience following the Vietnam War. Acrylic nails are an art form worthy of respect, and a rich history worth understanding.

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