

# Analog Incarnations: Steampunk Performance across Time

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## Abstract:

Steampunk performance interrogates dominant narratives of history through theatrical, science fictional stories that focus on the various socio-political interplays between retro-futurist technology and society. For the marginalised, such performances can renegotiate paradigms of historical Western imperialism, Eurocentric colonialism, and whiteness by centring the experiences of the oppressed. This article examines the artistic risk and imaginative potential associated with steampunk performance by marginalised voices when confronting historical trauma. Included with this analysis is the one-person play *Analog Incarnations*. Originally written between 2011 and 2012 at New York University, this science-fiction pulp performance blends historical fact, alternate history, and speculative fiction to relate the origins of Ay-leen the Peacemaker, a mysterious assassin who shoots Indochinese Governor-General Paul Armand Rousseau on 10 December, 1896.

**Keywords:** assassin, imperialism, marginalised histories, performance, postcolonialism, Paul Armand Rousseau, steampunk, time travel, theatre, Vietnamese diaspora.

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## Author's Note

Giặc đến nhà đàn bà phải đánh.

When the enemy is at the gate, the woman goes out fighting.<sup>1</sup>

(Vietnamese proverb)

When applied to performance, the steampunk aesthetic can act as a flexible storytelling vehicle that highlights the impact of historical paradigms upon the performers and the audience. Steampunk, an aesthetic movement inspired by nineteenth-century science fiction and fantasy, produces creative works which emphasise the socio-political roles of technological objects in the imaginative past. In this manner, such artworks exist in opposition to mainstream tastes; the aesthetic assembles a “bricolage” (Hebdige 2003: 123), as defined by Dick Hebdige, of retro-futuristic, mainstream pop-, and subculture influences. These artworks also

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invoke the implications of technology upon the physical body and in interpersonal relations. Often, application of steampunk's Victorian-inspired aesthetic results in Eurocentric and white-centric standards of beauty. In this article, however, I will address how performance using steampunk aesthetics can shift the human experience beyond this nostalgic Victoriana.

There is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of performance in neo-Victorian studies as “a collection of artefacts” that “can be responded to with varying levels of immersion, interaction, and historical distanciation” (Palmer and Poore 2016: 9). Bearing this point in mind, my artistic conceptualisation theory of steampunk performance and *Analog Incarnations* contribute to this growing collection. My theory also acknowledges Mike Perschon's definition of the aesthetic as “a set of commonly-understood visual arrays” that can be applied across multiple creative platforms (literature, music, visual art) or embodied in certain “steampunk things”, such as clothing, games, and art objects (Perschon 2010: 128). The steampunk aesthetic as performance, however, should also be viewed as a “lived aesthetic” akin to music or dance (Kapchan 2008: 470). In practice, steampunk performance works as a type of intellectual and creative play (Sutton-Smith 1997: 71), which produces a new form of subcultural capital among its practitioners (Thornton 1995: 98).

Moreover, neo-Victorian scholars have recognised that textual analysis should move beyond the geopolitical realm of the British Empire and the long nineteenth century to address the variety of global perspectives concerning a wider historical narrative of empire (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 4-5). Indeed, the aestheticised code of neo-Victoriana creates “a site within which the memory of empire and its surrounding discourses and strategies of representation can be replayed and played out” (Ho 2012: 5). Hence, the expansion of neo-Victorian studies in terms of geographical inclusion and its aesthetics as a vehicle to address imperialism's legacy makes this field of study keenly relevant to the steampunk performance piece I present after this article: *Analog Incarnations*, a one-person play that thematically addresses my questions concerning historical legacy and identity as a woman from the Vietnamese diaspora.

Steampunk aesthetic frequently uses the science fictional trope of time travel to justify its anachronistic look. In practice, then, steampunk objects become time capsules that contain collapsed temporal moments in their engagement with retro-futurism.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, steampunk performances

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evoke a whimsical manipulation of time and materiality, transporting the viewer into a theatrical ahistorical and trans-historical space. Postmodernist at its core, steampunk performance conceives of the world that “plays strategically with time and especially with tempo” (Bourdieu 1992: 81). While these performances are recognised for their entertainment value, they can also contain a highly self-aware political element in their avoidance of replicating or glamorising the oppressive histories they present. As Christine Ferguson notes, what differentiates steampunk performance from Victorian-era historical performance is the way steampunk allows the performers “to visually quote the Victorian period without seeming to slavishly repeat and emulate its clichéd ideological significations” (Ferguson 2011: 72).

Theatrical steampunk also opens up political spaces where oppressive historical trauma rooted in the nineteenth century can be explored. Navigating historical trauma using the neo-Victorian is complicated, depending on who is being represented and who is controlling the narrative; Marie-Luise Kohlke recognises this risk: “in spite of its potential to create experiential connectivity between different peoples, societies, and periods, trauma can also prove highly divisive, re-inscribing an unbridgeable alterity” (Kohlke 2008: 7-8). Nevertheless, I propose that for currently marginalised communities, steampunk performance offers a way to artistically process and cope with historical trauma. Steampunk romanticises this destabilisation as time travel, but each passage through time also reveals a historical scar. ‘What-if’ scenarios are performed with the self-reflexive knowledge that marginalised experiences are rooted in the ‘What-Was’, which often are sources of deep historical pain: war, slavery, social oppression. This metaphorical time travel becomes the vehicle by which I can tackle how the effects of “colonialism in the decolonized present persists in the form of palpable continuities” (Ho 2012: 10). Though steampunk performance may be humorous, light-hearted, or adventurous, the cracks of darker experience show through. For every hope proffered, for every joke rendered, for every nonsensical innovation discovered, shadows linger behind.

Yet steampunk performance, by imagining alternate historical narratives, can also create a valid counter-reality, as theorist Stephen Duncombe notes: “Reality is always refracted through the imagination, and it is through our imagination that we live our lives” (Duncombe 2007: 18). Steampunk’s heightened sense of the fantastic creates a blueprint by which

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the audience can map present-day concerns onto this fantasy reality in a palpable way; thus, a performance is transformed into an aesthetic convention, as defined by Lauren Berlant (Berlant 2011: 11). More than facilitating the understanding of trauma in a bearable way, however, steampunk as an aesthetic convention also gives the audience an alternate space in which to realise a better reality, which Berlant emphasises as the importance behind aesthetic conventions: “the work of undoing a world while making one *requires* fantasy [...]. It requires a surrealistic affectsphere to counter the one that already exists” (Berlant 2011: 263, original emphasis). As Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox recognise, when the nineteenth century is adapted, changed, or revisited in new forms, neo-Victorian works challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic historical narrative, “allowing us the space in which to grapple with the renewed crises we face in negotiating our (post)modern identities” (Bowler and Cox 2009/2010: 3). Likewise, postcolonial steampunk performance does not completely map onto historical fact, and the performance’s discrepancies create an awareness of the emotional and political complexities caused by past trauma even as it offers an opening to imagine possible solutions in the present.

In 2011-2012, I wrote and performed excerpts from a one-person play entitled *Analog Incarnations* as part of my Masters in Performance Studies programme at New York University. The purpose of this project was to dismantle the white, American-centric view of my Vietnamese-American identity through the steampunk imagination. Growing up in the United States, I have confronted the cultural and media stereotype of the Vietnamese ‘Saigon whore’ too many times to count. This stereotype is epitomised by the sex worker from Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), whose call, “Me So Horny” to US soldiers echoes in the American imagination. What lies behind cinema’s most famous street proposition is the history of violence enacted upon both the colonised body and, in particular, the female colonised body. In spite of the pervasiveness of this derogatory and reductive stereotype in the Western world, Vietnamese history has a long line of legendary female fighters. The myth of the country’s founding centres on the marriage between a sea dragon and the moon fairy Au Co, and it was Au Co and her fifty sons who remained on land to establish the legendary line of Hung kings. Every city in Vietnam has one street named in honour of *Hai Bà Trưng* (Two Ladies Trưng), the

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sisters *Trắc* and *Nhị*. This pair of warriors gathered an army to overthrow a Chinese invasion in 43 A.D. and ruled as queens for three years; when the Chinese invaded with a larger army and they were on the brink of capture, the women committed suicide by drowning rather than be taken captive. Other famous female warriors are Phùng Thị Chính, who reputedly rode into battle alongside the Trung sisters carrying her newborn babe in one arm and a sword in the other; Lady Thieu, who led a rebellion against the Chinese in the 3rd century; and Bùi Thị Xuân, a female general during the Tay Son rebellion.

*Analog Incarnations* stars my steampunk persona Ay-leen the Peacemaker, a character inspired by this national lineage and representing the tenacious strength of female postcolonial resistance. The creation of this persona was partially inspired by a conversation I had with a white acquaintance, who identified as a steampunk when I first entered the community. I had concerns about the roles colonialism and imperialism played in the genre. As a daughter whose family had a sordid past due to the ramifications of colonialism, I did not want to participate in a community that romanticised it. When I asked my white friend about colonialism's role in steampunk, she answered, "Sure, of course colonialism can be in steampunk. For instance, even though we live in America, we can pretend that the United States are still part of the colonies." Ay-leen the Peacemaker was born in joking response to that conversation: if 'steamsonas' (steampunk character personas) were based on Victorian pulp fiction tropes (the Explorer, the General, the Mad Scientist, the Airship Pirate), how would a nineteenth-century non-Western trope appear to the Western eye? Casting aside the Dragon Lady, the Coolie, the Noble Savage, and other such racist ilk, my answer was, "If I could play a character from the nineteenth century, I'd be a Tonkinese Buddhist assassin who shoots French imperialists in the face."

*Analog Incarnations* relates the not-so historically accurate life and times of Ay-leen the Peacemaker, as experienced through two viewpoints. One is that of Ay-leen, relating her life story on the night before her execution for the assassination of Indochinese Governor-General Paul Armand Rousseau on 10 December, 1896,<sup>3</sup> in Hanoi; the other is that of a nameless Vietnamese-American time-travelling historian as she attempts to discover more about this mysterious figure. The play blends facts about colonial Indochina and Vietnamese resistance movements with the fantasy

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of time travel, airship pirates, and science fictional weaponry. As the lives and family histories of both characters weave seamlessly throughout the piece (or were they ever separate in the first place?), *Analog Incarnations* serves to challenge Western assumptions about Vietnam and its diaspora.

My artistic aim in this piece is to recognise the ruptures caused by imperialist histories that are part of my cultural inheritance. While steampunk's games with time are all imaginative, the emotional, spiritual, and psychological impacts of such creative acts are real. I'm fascinated by how collective historical trauma is processed and how time is a form that I can manipulate theatrically to expose sites of historical trauma, for as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes: "the epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured" (Spivak 1999: 208). Under the guidance of subaltern studies, I propose using the imaginary for the marginalised performer to conceptualise a unique relation to the Other. Again, this imagining does not mean an escapist attempt to pursue something unrealistic, but for the individual to discover *a lost potentiality*. The realisation of this potential, in my view, is to see the place of the marginalised within our living historical and social spaces. This realisation, however, should not be conflated with the universalisation of a particular story. I fear stereotyping myself, or having collective trauma becoming generalised. Theatre enacts this trauma to its audience, transforming theory into praxis for an emotional and personalised experience, yet I acknowledge the artistic risk involved of the "narrative being co-opted or colonized by the listener [...] in its self-reflexive textuality" (Ho 2012: 19). While the risk is present, the centring of marginalised speakers and their crucial control of the narrative attempts to mitigate the potential for being co-opted. Additionally, while my individual experience is uniquely part of a larger collective, it is also differentiated by other factors that should not be ignored: my gender, my class, my sexual orientation, my abilities – and those of the characters I portray.

Taking all of these aspects into account, I have devised a philosophy of practice that puts the marginalised at the forefront of the historical imagination, while also striving not to become another "disputatious chronicler" (Spivak 2005: 480). I am invested in micro-change as opposed to macro-change, one-on-one and individual work or what Spivak calls: "another performativity, a contamination of the outlines of historiography by its own place in history" (Spivak 2005: 478).

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Thus, this play deliberately engages in low culture, pop culture, and science fiction to help reveal the marginalised's lost potentiality to the audience. Simultaneously, I ask my audiences to think and question even as they are entertained. Moreover, I maintain an awareness of my own individual differences alongside my privileges that enable me to tell these stories: to borrow from Spivak again, “[t]he solution, as I see it, is not to celebrate or deny difference, but find out what specific case of inequality brings about the use of difference and who can deny it on occasion” (Spivak 2005: 482). Interrogating the lost and elusive, pinpointing sites of historical rupture, creating temporal paradoxes on the stage – that is the purpose of steampunk performance and the metaphorical gears turning inside *Analog Incarnations*.<sup>4</sup>

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### **Analog Incarnations: A One-Woman Time-Travelling Adventure**

#### Directorial Notes

1. I use the phrase “change” a lot. This can note a minor costume change (like donning spectacles or a hat), an emotional change, or a physical acting change. The point is to emphasise a sudden persona shift.
2. The term “Iteration” is used instead of “Scene.” Iteration is a computer processing term that refers to a certain set of commands that are repeated until a desired result is achieved. The “Iterations” act as a countdown, and the Iteration titles should be displayed as part of the play.
3. All non-English words will have a translation beside them in brackets for dramaturgical convenience, but the translation should not be said by the actor.

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**Iteration 10: “The Beginning of the End”**

*[Setting: A place betwixt and between. There is a bare stage with a single chair. A projector should also be set up. In the corner is a small Vietnamese ancestral altar.*

*AY-LEEN bursts into the room. This should be dramatic: if there is a door, she should kick it open, if there is a stage, she should enter off-stage, preferably from the audience and storm to the front. The actor should deliberately speak in their natural-born accent when speaking English as Ay-leen.]*

AY-LEEN: Im! *[Shut up!]* Dừng lại! *[Don't move!]*

Tôi có tin tức. *[I have a message.]*

Các bạn có hiểu không? *[My friends, do you understand me?]*

Ne comprenez-vous? *[Do you understand?]*

Eh? Eh?

Вы понимаете? какого черта! Я не понимаю, почему эта штука не работает – *[Do you understand? What the hell! I don't understand why this thing isn't working...]*

Aw, fuck it – oh, there we go, now we understand each other. Damn Linguistic Transmodulation Apparatus, never on the right setting when you need it...

SO – I have a message.

Apparently – *[Takes out a small scroll, unrolls it and reads down the line.]* – one of you is supposed to die. *[Laughs, then deadpan.]* No, really, I'm serious. That's what the gun is for, and all, and that's my job, so –



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Oh, you're probably wondering who I am. Well, in this case for one of you, it only matters very briefly, but for those interested in my proffered services for the future – *[Whips out cards.]* I have business cards. *[Passes them out in a rush.]*

“Ay-leen the Peacemaker, a.k.a. Assassin-For-Hire a.k.a. le Terreur de Tonkin a.k.a. Death with a Smile a.k.a. the Cute Little Girl with the Big Gun.” Specialises in cheating husbands or wives, inconvenient business partners, unfortunately robust grandparents or ungrateful grandchildren and any members of the French regime of foreign invaders, up to and including our lovely bonhomie Governor-General Paul Armand Rousseau...

What? He's already dead? *[Checks pocket watch.]*

What time is it? June 1, 1897... *[Sheepish laugh. Sheaths the Peacemaker.]*  
My mistake there...

And where am I supposed to be?

*[Sits down in chair, as if strapped in.]*

Ah yes. Prison. Fuckin' A. *[Prison door slam sound.]*

### **Iteration 9: “Meanwhile, in the future...”**

*[Setting: Somewhere else. Current day, perhaps. There is a projector screen set-up onstage. REVISIONIST HISTORIAN runs in, carrying a sack of various items and books, dressed in a lab coat and goggles. She also has another odd device on her arm – the Nexus Point Indicator – that is constantly beeping. Behind her, the Peacemaker is propped up on display. She speaks in a posh British accent.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: *[She stumbles, drops the mess all onto the floor.]* Oh, Fuckin' A! Not again! *[Gathers items.]* Sorry sorry sorry. This is so rude of me; I swear I had everything ready *right* before you came. *[Gestures to audience.]* Heh, heh, heh, can't count on me to start things on time. That's why you're here, of course, yes? *[Points to the Nexus Point*

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*Indicator.]* I sent out a communications call, um, two, three weeks ago? I don't know why it took *you* so long to get here, considering we're *all* time travellers... I thought I'd need an extra hand, or... [*Looks at audience.*] Or five. [*Clears throat. Items are in awkward pile at her feet.*] You're here to review the evidence, right? I'm so close now; I've been tracking Ay-leen the Peacemaker for practically forever and a day. You ARE here to help, right? Oh sorry sorry, I'm so inconsiderate. [*Starts shaking hands with audience members.*] I'm a historian of revisionist thought. Revisionist Historian, as you would say. Yes, yes, I know I have critics but... You're not a critic, are you? I swear I have all the proof this time around! [*Picks up folder, clears throat.*] My latest report! On the night of December 10, 1896, Indochinese Governor-General Paul Armand Rousseau, who had been ill for several days, took to bed at approximately 9 PM in the evening. Three hours later, one explosive shot was heard from his bedchamber and, upon entering his servants found the Governor-General dead, shot, execution style, with an experimental Chinese M6-Semi-Combustion Single Shooter with augmented aetheric propulsion, known as "The Peacemaker." This prototype had been stolen from a visiting representative from the Qing Dynasty, who was interested in brokering a weapons contract a week before. After the assassination, authorities captured a young woman. She was brought to Maison Centrale de Saigon, was imprisoned for six months before undergoing a swift trial and sentenced to be executed, at dawn by firing squad, on June 1, 1897...

According to records, however, there is no mention of the final execution being carried out...

Hmmm... [*Shuffles papers, tosses them to the ground.*]

Okay, you have to help me backtrack a bit. I'm forgetting something. Sorry, sorry, sorry, something seems off. Perhaps extremely so. [*Scratches head.*] Because the records show that the Governor's assassination is the second Nexus Point that changed the entire time stream for French Indochina.... Let's see, let's see... [*Takes out slideshow clicker and clicks.*]

[*Slide: French Indochina.*]

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Let's start by working backwards a bit... French Indochina was considered the pearl of the French Imperial Empire. But pearls don't come out of nowhere. This one was pried, kicking and screaming, out of one pissed off oyster.

You see, the French really never wanted Southeast Asia for themselves. What they really wanted was an easy trading route to southern China.

*[Slide: Postcard of China, with the slogan "Welcome to the Middle Kingdom! Wish you were here!"]*

But, going back further, it all began with religion. French Catholic missionaries arrived in the 1600s, when southern Vietnam was known as Cochin China, following their Portuguese brothers. Tensions flared between these missionaries and local authorities in Vietnam; the French sent over some muscle to help them out, with the help of this guy, Alexandre de Rhodes.

*[Slide: Alexandre de Rhodes.]*

Rhodes arrived in 1624 and got down to business, converting the locals and angering the chieftains. Granted, he did bring other, genuine perks, such as the creation of the Romanised Vietnamese alphabet.

*[Slide: Vietnamese Bible.]*

He also declared himself on a mission to help convert this "barbarian civilisation."

*[Words "White Man's Burden" are stamped over the Bible.]*

As a result, thousands of innocent people died in these religious skirmishes. Let's be honest, no one liked getting that doorbell rung on their front step on the weekend to see these guys.

*[Slide: Rhodes as a Mormon missionary on the front stoop.]*

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But making martyrs out of missionaries and their kind doesn't conjure good karma either. I'm sure somewhere out there, Jesus and Buddha were having a sit-down and thinking, "Oh fudge cakes."

*[Slide: Double-face palming from Buddha and Jesus, drawing in the style of Buddy Christ from Kevin Smith's film Dogma]*

To protect these missionaries, the French sent ships to instigate warfare against the persecuting Vietnamese monarchy. Twenty years of bloody fighting finally resulted in the subjugation of Southern Vietnam – and control of the Mekong River – by the French in 1867.

*[Slide: A wanted poster for Ay-leen with an issued reward of 5,000 piastres.]*

Now what does all this have to do with our supposed mysterious Ay-leen the Peacemaker? Well, everything. I mean, we know the historical circumstances, but, what about her? Where does she fit in?

*[Takes out long stack of papers.]* Her family, supposedly, originally came from the South. But little else is known about her past. First off, she has no official Vietnamese name, as far as we can tell.

*[AY-LEEN on the wanted poster speaks.]*

AY-LEEN: *(onscreen)* Um, didn't I mention business cards? Ah well, history was never a good listener.

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: According to penal records, the woman identified herself as Ay-leen, BUT we assume this must be a mistranslation or a revolutionary pseudonym, like Ho Chi Minh's various revolutionary nom-de-plumes. The name "Ay-leen" has no correlation to any Vietnamese or Chinese or any other name in the local dialects. Clerks could have misheard her, of course, or maybe this is an indication that Ay-leen was, in fact, Eileen, or Irene, meaning that this woman could be Catholic in faith, or maybe even not Vietnamese at all –

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AY-LEEN: Are you insulted by all this? I'm insulted by all this. *[Looks above at the wanted poster headline]* Oh, they did get something wrong. *[Inserts a dash between the "Ay" and the "leen". Walks off the screen.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: Impossible! *(Irritated.)* There is no record of her execution... though it is assumed that this information, like everything else, had been lost to time. Perhaps, after the Centrale Saigon Prison had been converted into airship docks for the intergalactic trade routes to Mars, they were lost. A lot of things were lost in the Fall of Saigon. Many records ended up being destroyed or changed in accordance to praise certain party members and to obliterate any political opponents... But she lived, I swear. It would be quite an embarrassment to call you all here, and, well, listen, I have proof!

*[Rummages through sack at the podium base and holds up a piece of curved bamboo.]* Huzzah! I retrieved this from the government colonial archives. See here? No, it's not just a stick. *[Shows a signature branded into the side.]* This is part of the frame of her winding buffalo. A self-propelling plough built by her late uncle Tran Hung Dao, before he escaped into the jungle to fight the French.

You need more? But Ay-leen was here, in the historical record. I haven't spent countless hours, years, decades, looking for no one! *[Nexus Point Indicator beeps]* There it is! A sign! *[Leaves stage.]*

### **Iteration 8: "The Winding of the Buffalo"**

*[Setting: Small village in the Mekong Delta. The Year is 1883.*

*Slide: A winding buffalo, which looks like a wooden framework in the shape of a water buffalo, more or less, with giant rotating wheels for back legs that are lined in flat pieces of metal that stick out from the rims. Think of Theo Jansen's wind powered sculptures as inspiration. Sound of wooden clacking.*

AY-LEEN enters, pantomiming that she is riding on top of the buffalo. She is 13 years old, hair in pig tails, wearing a conical hat.]

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AY-LEEN: Mực Mực, Di! Di! (*Inky, Go! Go!*)

*[Steam whistle is heard.]* Im! (*Stop!*)

*[Sound of winding buffalo clanking to a halt.]* This is my buffalo Mực. Ain't he the pretty one? Mực was Bac Hai's favourite, and he taught me how to keep the buffalo in tip-top shape. *[Motions to assemble the buffalo as she explains.]*

A long, long time ago, there used to be plenty of real water buffalo. That was before a plague came and killed them off.

*[Slide: Rice fields with living buffalo. As the narration of the REVISIONIST HISTORIAN continues overhead, AY-LEEN says the below dialogue and works with volunteers from the audience.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: *[voiceover]* The First Nexus Point, according to my research. In 1660, an epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease swept across the Mekong river delta, decimating 95% of the bovine population. The disease became a generational occurrence, and villages suffered as their cattle kept dying. Rice fields were left fallow because of lack of resources. Famine ruled for several years. To save themselves, farmers designed mechanical animals made out of bamboo stalks and powered by a combination of steam power and kinetic energy. One family in every village was responsible for building and maintaining these wooden machines.

*[Slide: The mechanical blueprint of a winding buffalo.]*

AY-LEEN: And so all the water buffalo were replaced by winding buffalo. Here, help me get Mực powered up. We've got to take this key here *[Mimes holding a giant key, taller than her.]* and put in the centre of the wheels here *[Stumbles as she steadies the key into the hole.]* and then turn. Well, we've got to have a lot of people to wind this up now... Like this... Turn! *[Pushes down as in rotating a giant key.]* Turn! *[Does this again. Pants.]* I need some help here!

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*[Pulls people from audience to mimic motion of turning the latchkey. A bell is rung.]*

Good job! Now we know Mực is set to plough the fields. Di, di!

*[Wooden clacking sound as Mực moves off. AY-LEEN shields her eyes as she watches it go.]*

Mực is pretty smart. He can move by himself and all you need is a little nudge with a pole to guide him in the right direction. *[Watches the buffalo for a moment.]* Bac Hai and my father worked on the buffalo together. But when the French came, he ran away into the jungle before they could find him. Father always said Bac Hai left to change the world, but nothing really changed except for the arrival of the French.

*[Change.]*

*[Slide: Map of French territory in 1867.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: *[voiceover]* The southern half of Vietnam was taken over by the French and declared to be the colony of Cochin China. It's one thing to declare yourself a colony. Especially without support from the countryside. Unlike other colonial takeovers by France you can't just plonk yourself in the capital city with a flag and declare it yours.

Many Confucian scholars left their positions on village councils and schoolrooms rather than cooperate with the French. Tran Hung Dao was one of them. The wave of vanished scholars proved to be problematic for the French government, whose colonial system depended upon recruiting the local officials and integrating them into the French administration.

AY-LEEN: I always imagined Bac Hai out there, hiding among the hill tribes, building bamboo fighting machines, or maybe joining a monastery. My parents always lit incense for him every New Year, to ask the ancestors to watch over him. Now I'm 13 and mind the buffalo myself. That's also when I finally met Bac Hai. He didn't become a hill person or an engineer or even a monk.

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There I was, out in the fields, helping with re-sowing the rice plants. On the dike, reining in Mực before afternoon naptime. It suddenly became windy. Maybe a storm was coming on. There was this immense ... floating thing, and a dull roar. The rising winds got all of the buffalo going – *[Steam whistling sounds that resemble the bellowing of a bull. AY-LEEN reins in an invisible Mực.]* Whoa, im, im, Mực! Down boy!

There. Hovering above, giant wooden and bronze propellers and a huge, oilskin rigging. *[Sound of clanking gets louder, more dysfunctional.]*

Mực, I said whoa!!! *[is taken away off-stage]*

### **Iteration 7: “A Brief Explanation of Time”**

*[Setting: Somewhere else. Current time. REVISIONIST HISTORIAN enters, dragging an armful of tools and an assortment of parts in her arms. She throws them down in disgust.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: No, no, no, no! Stupid contraption, I thought I could get the coordinates right, but for some reason. *[Faces audience.]* You know what the most difficult thing about maintaining a time machine is? Making sure the bloody thing stays in the same damn period you want it to stay in! The Temporal Dislocator Assimilation Module needs to be recalibrated, the Chameleon Button doesn't work, and the brakes are *totally* off. The whole machine makes this weird wheezing noise when you try to stop it – *[Imitates the noise that the Doctor Who T.A.R.D.I.S. makes.]* That's the last time I rent out a Time and Relative Dimensions in Space apparatus. That gal looked a bit shady to me ...

*[Slide: Jodie Whittaker or the current actor playing Doctor Who.]*

But whatcha gotta do? And I only have this available for another *[Checks watch.]* *Crap!* Less than an hour! Okay, okay, moving on –

*[The Nexus Point Indicator on her arm suddenly beeps.]*



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REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: *[Checks the contraption.]* Success! See here? It's my Nexus Point Indicator. We're tracking the right time stream at least. *[Sighs, and rummages through a pile of historical maps.]* How do I know? Well, since we've been cruising through the space-time vortex for this long, you might as well know *something* to help me out. Let me explain.

*[Slide: A red dot.]*

This is us.

*[Slide: A red line through the red dot.]*

The West has a linear understanding of time. You go forward, but you can never go backwards. You can never change what has happened. But what I've discovered is that time is actually more like this.

*[Slide: A sudden scribble-y ball of red.]*

Time exists in multitudes. It fluctuates. It repeats. It can even back up, on occasion. Time is, basically, fluid, and the past can be, in a way, changed. For example:

*[Series of progressively faster slides illustrating the changes to history, and the REVISIONIST HISTORIAN talks faster and faster as this goes on.]*

Armand Rousseau dies. France panics. After decades of fighting, millions of francs, and thousands of soldiers killed, they leave Indochina and abandoned all plans to pursue an empire in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese government makes an alliance with the Kingdom of Siam, which created the Prosperous and Equal Asian Countries Endeavour, or PEACE. Fearing Britain's actions during the Boxer Rebellion against China, Japan was selected to lead PEACE after winning the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. The Japanese developed the most efficient fleet of airships in the region. PEACE continued to act as a vanguard against European imperialism. Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing Dynasty agrees to join PEACE, which becomes an economic and technological powerhouse and launches a preliminary space programme in 1920, while the rest of Europe broiled in the aftermath

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of World War I – *[Stops for breath.]* Hmm, something looks off. And yes ... *[Ponders, then a revelation.]* This, folks, is what we call an alternate history.

*[Slide: Back to the first red dot.]*

Remember this wee dot here? That is us in time. But when time gets changed – when it is shifted from what it has been before, we didn't change time necessarily, but created an *alternate* time instead. This history is not our history – yet it is our history in another universe. And that universe was created because of a Nexus Point, a break in time.

The First Nexus Point was when the winding buffalo were built, a sign of technological advancement not there before. When that happened *[Points to Nexus Point Indicator.]* this baby was beeping up a storm.

What we need to do now is find a Second Nexus Point and because something is very, very wrong with that point in time right now; it's getting more unstable. *[Pulls out maps and charts and scratches head.]* Time has been deteriorating for a long time now, and I just can't put my finger on why, but I suspect it has to do with Ay-leen, the person missing from history. She is the key ...

*[Nexus Point Indicator beeps faster.]*

*Slide: AY-LEEN in the same position, but in the background is a Vietnamese village, and instead of charts, she is holding a scroll and scratching her head]*

Anyway, back to fixing this time machine. *[Gathers bits and pieces and leaves stage.]*

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**Iteration 6: “The Black Flag Army”**

*[Setting: Small village in the Mekong Delta. The Year is 1883. AY-LEEN reappears onstage, taking the same position as herself on screen.]*

*Slide: The Black Flag Army airship, The Silver Phoenix.]*

AY-LEEN: *[Holding scroll, and reading.]* Bac Hai sent this letter by the telegraph wireless before he arrived: “Greetings my dear family! Stop. Became a pirate. Stop. Will be visiting soon. Stop. Respectfully yours, Tran Hung Dao. Stop.”

*[Change. Puts on eye patch and the thatch cape to become BAC HAI, a middle-aged man with a barrel chest and a pedantic air. He talks like a propaganda poster and a sly vagrant, a thick Vietnamese accent weighing down his words.]*

BAC HAI: *[Addressing young AY-LEEN.]* You took very good care of Mực while I was gone, didn’t you? Whoa, whoa, he’s gotten a lot bigger since I last saw him, I’ll tell you that. *[Chuckles, turns.]* Salutations and good health to you, my little brother. *[Approaches, arms wide, then draws back in an invisible rebuke.]* Younger brother, is this the way to honour your elder sibling? As if he was a beggar wandering on the streets? *[Sits on chair.]* You think I’m a bandit? Well, yes, I am a bandit, but that’s not the point! We are in need of help, Em Min, and I’ve come to you. *[Pause.]* As they say, “Though a man eats alone, he calls upon the whole village to crank his buffalo.” Did you think I could sit there and let the French take over? How can we stop these invaders from taking our land, or property, our lives?

As they say, “Victory makes you into an Emperor, defeat into a rebel.” The French may have their paws all over the royal throne, but that does not mean we are wrong for being labelled the enemy. Come with me, little brother, we might fight. Liu Yongfu pays decent wages at least, and the mandarins have hired him for our cause.

*[Slide: Liu YongFu, with the caption “Leader of the Black Flag Army”.]*

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Sure, he's a Chinese crook and a scoundrel, but the mandarins thought his mercenary fiends are the strongest fighters in the region. Buddha's luck falls upon an old man like me for keeping up with them, but who else can write their letters home and figure out how to set up a wireless telegraph in the middle of the jungle?

*[Leans in, whispers.]* I do not mean to pressure you, but the French are making a sweep through here tonight on a commandeering raid. They'll take the food, any able boys and men, and the buffalo, even, if they're not already dismantled for the season. But the commanders know this is my village ... I want you and your family to leave, before something happens.

Here's a map. I have a small air schooner. The captain is a friend of mine. He can take you out to Nhật Bản. There, you'll be safe.

*[Note: Nhật Bản is the Vietnamese name for Japan. Change.]*

AY-LEEN: I wanted to leave too, but not my country. I didn't understand why we had to run away. I worried about my friends, about the other families. About Mực.

I ran into the tilling fields, where the buffalo whirled – to call them in early would be a giveaway to any French scouts, Bac Hai had said.

I saw one of the young boys my father employed and told him to take care of my buffalo. Mực had to stay here, in the village, because that's what he was made to do. *[Picks up piece of curved bamboo that the REVISIONIST HISTORIAN held – all that remains of Mực – and rubs it fondly before putting it down by the ancestral altar and walking away.]* Strong winds to you, old boy.

*[Change.]*

BAC HAI: *[Packing things into a sack, but then kneels down.]* What are you doing here, *con* *[little child]*? Shouldn't you be with your parents on the schooner? *[Pause.]*

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You want to fight? Little girls aren't meant to fight wars, you know. *[Laughs.]* You say that you're a grown woman then? Hmmmm, as they say, I suppose, "When the enemy is at the gate, the woman goes out fighting."

Well, then *[Offers a hand and pantomimes petting a small head.]* Listen, why don't you run off and get your father and we'll talk.

*[Change. Takes off eye patch. Takes hair out of pig tails.]*

AY-LEEN: I knew my uncle was lying, though, and trailed him to his own airship, The Silver Phoenix, and hid myself in the rigging. Three days later, Bac Hai found me and the ship was deep in French-controlled territory. He had no choice but to have me out of the gate, ready for battle.

#### **Iteration 5: "We're Gonna Rise Above 1884-1885"**

*[Setting: Somewhere else. Current time. REVISIONIST HISTORIAN runs in holding the two Nerf Guns, one black, and one blue, white, and red.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: All right, who wants to play "Pirates & Imperialists?" *[Divides the audience into two groups, with a representative from each group standing onstage. Hands them each a Nerf gun and makes them stand back to back, duelling style.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: This is called "steampunk re-enactment." Now the name of the game is that you *[points to the Black Nerf Gun]* are the Black Flag Army and you *[points to the second tri-coloured gun]* are the French forces and both of you are fighting the Sino-French War.

*[Slide: Sino-French War 1884-1885: A series of conflicts between Chinese, Vietnamese, and French forces over control for the Tonkin region.]*

The Vietnamese mandarins hired the Black Flag Army, a mercenary group of pirates lead by the Chinese fighter Liu Yongfu. The Black Flag Army was later backed by Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing Dynasty as well, sensing the need to ward off encroaching European imperialism. At the peak of his Army, Yongfu lead over 7,000 men.

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I'm going to list off several battles and on the count of three, I want you to fire. We'll see who wins the Sino-French War this time around.

*[In a series of duels, with much cheering prompted from either side, the two volunteer combatants exchange rounds, each one marking a specific battle that is listed on the slide above them. The actual outcome is included below, but of course, the duels don't have to match the actual history.]*

*Music: "Rise Above" by Black Flag plays as the game begins.]*

*[Calls out each battle as it happens.]:*

Battle of the Paper Bridge! The Black Flag Army get bonus points for killing Henri Rivière, the prominent French naval captain. *[Imitating the Frenchman.] Sacré bleu! Zut aloooooors!*

Battle of Phu Hoai! *[Black Flag victory]*

Battle of Palan! *[French victory]*

Battle of Son Tay! *[French Victory]*

Battle at Hung Hoa! *[French Victory]*

Battle of Hoa Moc! *[Black Flag victory]* Now we're at the end of the Sino-French war. What happens now?

Final duel, begin!

*[Last shots are given. Whatever the outcome, have the French "win," whether through underhanded means or an actual successful hit. Send the volunteers back to their seats.]*

*Slide: The Silver Phoenix Airship.]*

And that covers the next several years of Ay-leen's time stream. Now, I don't have any substantial record of Ay-leen's participation in those battles, but there were sightings of the Silver Phoenix. After the Battle of Hoa Moc, the airship took heavy losses and was last seen flying toward the Sea of Japan, presumably to seek out a pirate-controlled atoll there. But that is where the ship disappeared from historical record ...

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*[Nexus Point Indicator starts beeping.]* The Second Nexus Point! It approaches! I have to recalibrate the time machine!

*[Exits stage. A loud explosion is heard.]*

**Iteration 4: “The Clockwork Phoenix Temple or the Obligatory Transformation Montage 1886-1892”**

*[Setting: The shores of Nhật Bản. 1886. AY-LEEN comes out, limping, carrying the eye patch in one hand. Goes to the ancestral altar and places the patch there. Kowtows three times.]*

AY-LEEN: Bac Hai taught me everything there was to know about flying and proverbs. But he didn’t make it out of the last campaign. None of his crew did. As Bac Hai would’ve put it, “As they say, ‘Life is a temporary stop, death is the journey home.’”

*[Crawls forward and collapses on the ground.]*

All I remember was a dull roaring and vertigo as the deck of the Silver Phoenix spun wildly out of control and the sea came to meet us... I thought about my parents then, about how they would’ve felt to hear their daughter lost at sea, and this overwhelming sense of failure. That I never worked to see the change I wanted. *[Gets up.]* Next thing I know, there’s an old lady poking me with her walking stick.

*[Change. This can be, literally, a kimono robe thrown over AY-LEEN’S outfit, with a stage hand tying on the obi as she speaks. MECHAMOTO-SENSEI is a stooped, crotchety old woman, with a keen eye for repairing broken things.]*

SENSEI: Ah, another piece of bric-a-brac that’s washed ashore. So many scrapped people lately. Come here, child, get that sea water out of your lungs, and let Mechamoto-sensei prepare you some tea.

*[A Japanese tea set is brought out. As SENSEI says her monologue, she is conducting a traditional tea ceremony.]*

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Welcome to the Clockwork Dojo, child. You may call me Mechamoto-sensei and you can thank me for dragging you off that beach later. I am only a tinker. I fix things. I fix people. How do I fix them? I see the shape of their former selves and, if I work hard at it, I can reshape you. Mould you. Make you better, faster, stronger. We have the technology. That is, if that's what you want. *[Squints.]* What do you want, child? Talk of a perfect world now, a world of fairness and just rule, without the French? Hrumpf, all this talk about Europeans is making everyone edgy. We hear the same from the Emperor, and I can understand why you southern countries feel the same. Science is the answer, child. Technology is the answer. But remember, not all technology can bring peace or happiness. Sometimes, technology makes things go too swiftly. It makes the person think in a whirlwind, consider only with anger and passion and not with deliberation. Without forethought.

Tea-making is a skill of meditation. Of caring for every motion, every gesture, every sense of the body. It cools the passions and the rage. Tea-making helps you reconsider your place in the world.

If you see your world broken, or bent out of shape, of course, you feel compelled to fix it again. But you also have to understand, once something is fixed, it may not return to the exact state it was before the thing was broken. There are scars that remain, sutures, imperfections. Part of mending is to accept that once a thing is patched, those imperfections will remain, and you have to accept them.

*[Offers tea bowl.]*

I can give you the skills you think you may need to win: thought and patience and determination. Drink child, and think long before you answer.

*[Sips tea herself and closes her eyes. Thinks for a moment. Then, opens her eyes and throws off her robes. Change.]*

AY-LEEN: Give it to me, Sensei.

*[Slide: Flashing letters. "Montage Time" Music: "Eye of the Tiger." AY-LEEN, running in place.]*



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*[Repeats as if in some trance state.]*

Time is a cycle of suffering.  
 A cycle we have to break.  
 To break the cycle.  
 You must understand what drives the cycle.  
 Our desires motive the cycle.  
 Our desire springs more desire.  
 We are caught in an endless loop.  
 This loop is our suffering.  
 To break the cycle.  
 Is to let go of desire.  
 To let go of desire.  
 And to end suffering.  
 Is to see yourself as part of time.  
 Nothing more than a part of time.  
 Rebuild yourself within time.

*[Stops.]*

But if I let go of desire...  
 What would I fight for?

*[Sits, exhausted.]*

Years pass. I do everything Mechamoto-sensei tells me to. But I'm not at peace. *[Jumps up.]* What do you mean rejecting desire, Sensei? This world is broken. How can I fix it by just sitting here and making tea? By chanting that "time is a cycle, yadda yadda yadda, break the cycle yadda, yadda." It's not like we can control time anyway! People are dying out there, y'know? Fighting a war I should be fighting!

*[Change.]*

SENSEI: Have you not been listening to what I am saying, child? Do you think that shooting a man in the face would fix all the problems in the world?

*[Change.]*

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AY-LEEN: Depends on the man. *[Pause.]* I took the next junk south after that conversation.

*[Picks up tea bowl in the corner and cleans the rim in the ritualistic manner as in a tea ceremony. Sighs and places the bowl by the ancestral altar and exits, quickly.]*

### **Iteration 3: “The Target”**

*[Setting: Somewhere else. Current time, somewhat. REVISIONIST HISTORIAN enters, the Nexus Point Indicator beeping madly.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: At last! A record, found buried and sealed away in red tape in the depths of the French archives. I knew it was still around! *[Opens dusty tome.]*

Ay-leen was spotted at the various incidents for several years. In 1889, she was part of a plot to blow up the transnational Hanoi railroad. 1890, part of a plot to bomb a major bridge in Saigon. 1891, part of a plot to burn down the French Saigon Parliament House. 1892, made a rampaging army of steel and bamboo buffalo during Bastille Day celebrations in Hue.

But the big guy Ay-leen wanted? This one. Governor-General Paul Armand-Rousseau.

*[Slide of Paul Armand Rousseau, with drawn-on devil horns.]*

He must’ve been a terrible bloke, for her to have set her sights on him. Probably a power-hungry political who clawed his way to the very top... So, he started off as an engineer. But I’m sure he was a bloodthirsty engineer. He graduated in the Polytechnic School, specialising in roads and bridges (roads of destruction, certainly, building bridges of no return). Elected as part of the National Assembly representative in 1871, where he focused on ... warmongering, maybe? Sending military contracts overseas? Hmm... Looks like he was known for Public Works. Okay. Armand Rousseau was a man who liked building roads. He was promoted as Director of Roads and Navigation Department Public Works. Under Secretary of State for Public

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Works. Undersecretary of the Navy and the Colonies from April to December. Finally, Armand Rousseau becomes Governor General of Indochina, on December 29, 1894.

So, in the end, he was just an architect and a bureaucrat. Historians said here that Armand Rousseau did not seek this high office, but he did not think, despite his age and his health, to refuse them. Not sure why the French chose him to lead the country when it did. After decades of warfare, maybe no one wanted to take it, and the pencil-pusher had no choice otherwise...

He wrote how he wanted to fix a broken country, and Indochina was that country.

*[In sudden realisation, the REVISIONIST HISTORIAN takes off lab coat, slowly and looks at herself.]* But I thought... but I... *[Now in a distinct natural accent, as she throws the lab coat to the ground and stomps on it.]* But he didn't have the answer, did he? His solution to the Tonkin Question? Bridge-building –?! Who solves anything with bridge-building –??

*[Suddenly exits.]*

### **Iteration 2: “The Assassination”**

*[Setting: Hanoi. Governor's Palace. December 10, 1896. A masquerade. A quadrille plays. AY-LEEN enters. She removes the Peacemaker from its display onstage and sheathes it on her back. As the music continues, she relates.]*

AY-LEEN: December 10th. 1896. The last night of Governor-General Paul Armand Rousseau's life. He suffered from grievous indigestion. I remember seeing him from across the room.

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: *[Onscreen behind AY-LEEN, reading from her documents. The Nexus Point Indicator is beeping steadily in the background.]* Okay this is what, Ay-leen ... wrote ... Yes, I found her, didn't I? *[Laughs, slightly unhinged.]* Ahem. I have here, Ay-leen the Peacemaker's confession made during her trial for the assassination of

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Armand Rousseau. “The Governor-General was pale, sickly. I wondered how this single man held the fate of a people in his clammy grasp.”

AY-LEEN: *[onstage]* The Governor-General left to go to the toilet six times in two hours. I counted.

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: “He had applied so much perfumed water over himself after each time – probably to cover up any stench – that one would smell a mix of rose petals with a faint trace of shit standing in his presence. He refused to dance, sitting at the table, looking sorry for himself and avoiding conversation with his peers.”

AY-LEEN: Finally, at half-past nine, he excused himself.

*[As REVISIONIST HISTORIAN narrates, AY-LEEN leaves the stage and pantomimes the next moves among the audience members.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: “I left to go back outside, to climb the vines on the lattice going up the side of the mansion. By the time I got to his window, he was already getting ready for bed. And then, he sat down on the bed. Another loud, wet sound and an embarrassed grumble. The man had shat himself, I was sure of it.”

AY-LEEN: He wasn’t sent here to rule. He was sent as a bureaucratic excuse. He was sent here to die.

Does that mean they were giving up? That if I killed this man, this pathetic, dying man, my country would be free? How broken he looked, sitting there, as if bearing the burden of an empire that didn’t want to be its empire.

*[Asks audience member.]* Do you want me to kill you? Do you want to die for your beloved nation of France? *[Whatever the audience member says doesn’t matter.]*

I didn’t hear what he had to say. I didn’t have to. I didn’t want to. Mechamoto-sensei’s question rang in my ears. “Do you think that shooting a man in the face would fix all the problems in the world?”

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And I tell the Governor-General this:

*[AY-LEEN makes her way back onstage. REVISIONIST HISTORIAN and AY-LEEN both say, in unison.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN and AY-LEEN: “When the enemy is at the gate, the woman goes out fighting.”

*[AY-LEEN fires the Peacemaker, then lowers the Peacemaker and raises her hands. Offstage, someone shouts “Arrêter cette femme!” REVISIONIST HISTORIAN does the same gesture onscreen but for a different reason. The Nexus Point Indicator is beeping so fast it goes into a flatline, much like a hospital monitor does after someone dies.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: Here it is! There is it ... Yes, this all truly happened, right? Ay-leen had been sentenced to die as a result ... It’s all real. I confess. You see, I killed him, I killed the Governor-General. *[Laughs, sudden idea dawning on her. REVISIONIST HISTORIAN exits the screen and the video shuts off.]*

AY-LEEN: I confess. *[Pantomimes arms chained behind her back goes to a chair in the centre of the stage and sits down.]* You see, I killed him, I killed the Governor-General.

*[Change.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: I wanted him to die. He was supposed to die. But I wish I didn’t have to kill him. Is that enough for you?

*[Change.]*

AY-LEEN: Is this how you fix a world? I understand why I have to die now.

*[Change.]*

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REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: Now I remember how it happened. Did I repair anything in my time stream?

*[Change.]*

AY-LEEN: As they say, “Better to die than to live on with a bad reputation.” All the best warrior women in our history ended up choosing death or subservience. I accept death.

*[Change.]*

REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: *[Pause.]* My real name? Maybe it is Ay-leen? Irene? Eileen? Oh, I don’t even know my own name anymore, y’know how that happens. Been cooped up through the space-time vortex to and fro for a few centuries and the memory just goes to pieces.

Why did I kill the Governor? Well, why do people want to go back to kill Hitler, or Mussolini, or Napoleon? Maybe we think by destroying that one person, that one figure, time would’ve changed. We would’ve fixed everything.

But that just assumes that a new bloke wouldn’t take over in his place, eh? That if you chop the head off a chicken, the rest would follow?

*[Somber.]* I grew up thinking that the world had been bent out of shape, but for how long had it been broken? The Governor certainly wasn’t the first. I’d probably have to kill not only the Governor-General, but Henri Rivière too and Alexandre de Rhodes, and then the last couple of Chinese Emperors, eh? How can you save people from a system of war and abuse? How do you protect a land that’s only known outside invasion?

*[Change.]*

AY-LEEN: Did I even change anything? Anything at all? I guess I wouldn’t know. *[Laughs uproariously.]* Go ahead. Lock me up here for a few months while deciding whether executing a crazy woman is worth it. I have all the time in the world.

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*[Stands up with a flourish, removes the Nexus Point Indicator and the Peacemaker.]*

**Iteration 1: “The Second Nexus Point”**

*[Setting: Dawn. June 1, 1897. Centrale de Saigon. AY-LEEN / REVISIONIST HISTORIAN puts the Nexus Point Indicator and the Peacemaker by the altar. Kowtows three times and then stands up to face the audience.]*

AY-LEEN / REVISIONIST HISTORIAN: The West has a linear understanding of time. You go forward, but you can never go backwards. You can never change what has happened.

But what *I’ve* discovered, is that time is actually more like this: I realise that time moves in cycles. The cycles of the weather. Dry seasons. Monsoon seasons. Of the rice harvest. Tilling, sowing, flooding, sowing, gathering. So it goes with our own lives. The person is born and dies and is reborn again. Things get broken, wash up on distant shores, and have to be rebuilt again.

As the hours pass, I think about my memories. I think about my parents, Bac Hai, Mechamoto-sensei, everyone I’ve known and loved.

Bac Hai would’ve said, “As they say, ‘People think time goes by; time thinks that the people go by.’”

Sensei would’ve said, “This is the moment that time curves and you see everything that had gone before you. Are you happy with the shape of this world you created?”

Mực would’ve said, “Mooooo.”

I think all of them mentioned something important. Perhaps, throughout the eons of time, there will always be the invader, the empire, the oppressor.

But for every one of them, there will always be me.

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And we duel, endlessly, as part of the same time-stream.

*[Pause.]*

It is dawn.

The jailer releases me just as the sky starts to grow lighter. *[Goes to the front of the room.]* In the centre of Centrale de Saigon are the execution grounds.

*[Walks to centre.]* The dawn air is warm and wet. The air I breathe in feels like clouds, heavy with humidity.

I am led before the western wall of the prison, so I face the East. That's what they do for prisoners who die by firing squad, so they can feel the warmth of the sun. I see the shadows of the soldiers loom along the ground. They turn into hungry ghosts beckoning me to join them.

*[Takes out a blindfold.]* I feel the cloth tied over my eyes.

*[Ties cloth over her eyes.]* The officer asks: Any last words?

I want to sound all Zen and stuff or maybe be angry, but I don't feel either. So I say nothing. I close my eyes beneath the blindfold.

And the officer says: "Prêt? Sur le compte de trois..."

Suddenly, I remember Mưc. Did those village brats take care of my bamboo buffalo? Were all his pieces kept together? Did they keep his gears oiled? What about his fresh coat of beeswax? Was that crack in his turnkey mended?

And the officer says: "Un!"

I hear a distant wind blow across the yard. *[Sound of wind blowing.]*



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It sounds so dramatic. Loud. Like in the beginning of the tilling, when me and my parents spin the buffalo. Their engines would grunt and bellow. Their propellers would whirl louder and louder...

And the officer says: “Deux!”

*[The sound transitions from wind to a whirling. More mechanical. Like that of a time machine.]*

I hear the buffalo now.

*[Sound gets louder and louder, until she realises it isn't the wind at all. AY-LEEN / REVISIONIST HISTORIAN turns her head toward the sound.]*

And the officer says –

*[Lights out.]*

**End of play**

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Notes**

1. The saying alludes to the nation's 2,000-year long recorded history of battling foreign invasions, most of them spearheaded by the Chinese.
2. 'Retro-futurism' is a creative art movement based upon the imagining of 'futurist' technology in historical time periods, usually the 1960s or earlier. Lloyd Dunn first invented the phrase and also ran the sci-fi magazine *Retro-Futurism* that published from 1988 to 1993.
3. Governor-General Armand Rousseau certainly did pass on unexpectedly that day in Hanoi, resulting in a French political crisis, the outcome of which was drastically different from the way described in *Analog Incarnations*.

4. To best utilise the space allowed for this article, the cast of characters, props list, timelines of Vietnamese history and steampunk alternate history, and historical resources used while writing the play do not appear in this publication but can be found here: <https://beyondvictoriana.com/analog-incarnations-jnvs>.

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