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The Respectable Queer: LGBT TV and the Nation of Vietnam

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Southeast Asian Studies

by

Quynh Thuy Truong

March 2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Respectable Queer: LGBT TV and the Nation of Vietnam

by

Quynh Thuy Truong

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies
University of California, Riverside, March 2024
Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

How does LGBT media in Vietnam signify the relationship between the queer self and social belonging? How do queer individuals negotiate and reinvent this relationship through their bodily, affective, and technological practices? This thesis examines the production and spectatorship of LGBT TV shows in Vietnam to illuminate how the new politics of visibility informed by social movements and legal changes under the banner of LGBT rights redefines the conditions under which the queer self can attain a "good life." Drawing from ethnographic work at the filming set of a major LGBT talkshow in Vietnam and 8 semi-formal interviews with the queer audiences, I argue that the technologies of LGBT media production in Vietnam reproduce the queer selfhood in a politics of respectability, which allows certain manifestations of the queer self to belong to the nation while excluding others that are considered to not contribute to the public

good. Respectability produces and disciplines different embodiments of queerness

through two intertwining and contradicting logics of self-governance. First, the

respectable queer is imagined to be a self-motivated individual, responsible for the

project of attaining success and modernity for themselves. Second, the respectable queer

is demanded to align their bodily and affective expressions with the moral collective of

the nation. However, my thesis also excavates alternative queer affect and relationalities

among the marginalized queer subjects articulated by refusal, invisibility, and negativity,

which promises new anti-assimilationist queer politics in Vietnam.

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INTRODUCTION

> "At the beginning, most of the team members held a discriminatory attitude toward these LGBT people. After we realized that there are absolutely talented and successful (*giỏi)* people in this group, we thought a revamped format of the show could celebrate the *true success* of the LGBT community. We then decided to organize the show by grouping participants according to their profession so that we would have episodes dedicated exclusively to LGBT doctors, LGBT businessmen, LGBT teachers. We need these people to appear in separate episodes because people like you would not relate to people who are selling fruit on the street. We must produce more serious talk shows for them to bring a new positive light to the community."

Hằng[1], a production team member of "A Bright LGBT Life,"[2] shared this objective with me when we first met on the ninth floor of CCC[3], the media conglomerate located in District 7 in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. After about one month convincing the staff at CCC to let me into the filming studio of their TV talk show, I was finally invited to a preliminary meeting with Hằng, a manager at CCC. Once we reached the agreement that I would be stationed in the office of "A Bright LGBT Life" production team and be able to follow them to the filming site, I asked Hằng to share about the overall motivation for and vision of the show. Hằng's statement quoted above is intertwined with the notions

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[1] All names in this thesis are pseudonyms.
[2] I use this as a pseudonym for the name of the TV show which I analyze in this research. I choose to use the acronym LGBT as this is the most widely used terminology among Vietnamese people, compared to LGBTQ or LGBTQ+.
[3] I use CCC as a pseudonym for the name of the media company where I did my fieldwork.

of "success" and "positivity" that divorced LGBT people working in high-class professions from those laboring in lower-ranked jobs. Through my participation in the production processes of the show, "success" and "positivity" came to haunt the queer bodies on and off the filming set in ways that caused me to rethink the ways through which the queer self is promised a 'good life' through attachment to a community or a public. These experiences led me to ask: How does LGBT media in Vietnam signify the relationship between the queer self and social belonging? How do queer individuals negotiate and reinvent this relationship through their bodily, affective, and technological practices?

My thesis argues that the technologies of LGBT media production in Vietnam embed and reproduce the queer selfhood in a politics of respectability, which allows certain manifestations of the queer self to belong to the nation while excluding others that are considered to not contribute to the public good. To begin with, the concept of respectability is borrowed from black feminist theory, which illuminates a politics that legitimate the claims to full citizenship of black people who occupy the higher rung in the interlocking power hierarchy of gender, class, and sexuality at the expense of lower-class, homeless, and queer communities (White 2001; Wolcott 2001). However, as I examine the case of Vietnam, the logics upon which respectability governs and classifies different embodiments of queerness are anchored by two intertwining and almost contradicting rationalities of selfhood. First, the respectable queer is imagined to be a self-motivated individual, responsible for the project of attaining success and modernity for themselves. This mode of self-governance masks structural inequalities as a matter of free will and

personal capabilities. Second, the respectable queer is simultaneously demanded to align their bodily and affective expressions with the moral collective of the nation. With a focus on affect, I will demonstrate that the absorption of the queer self into this collective returns them to the status of the 'problem' within the order of heteronormative sexualities. These apparently contrasting logics of selfhood end up promising the queer self a 'good life' through a limited form of belonging to the collective, altogether reproducing the power system that undergird the nation-building processes.

Nonetheless, such dual logics of respectability politics leave the female queer subject in invisibility, which sparks alternative forms of queer affect and relationalities beyond both the self-regulating and collectivist pathways. This thesis pays attention to these alternative queer subjectivities by zooming into the moments of disjuncture, failures, and contestations in LGBT media production as well as the practices of spectatorship among the queer audiences of these LGBT media. These subjects experience queer desires without fitting into any identity categories, notions of success, and collective moral logics, thus falling outside of the grid of respectability. This condition of invisibility prompts these subjects to reject such respectability politics and cruise toward alternative futures of queer politics in Vietnam. I see these rejectionist modalities of queerness as feminist, as such affect, relationalities, and lived experiences contest the interlocking normativities articulated by class, gender, and sexual hierarchies. My research thus juxtaposes the politics of visibility that produces the respectable queer in LGBT media with the fragments of invisibility, negativity, and unrespectability among queer subjects that promises an anti-normative, anti-assimilationist queer politics.

Queering Suzhi: Governmentality and Politics of Visibility

In this thesis, I zoom into the various ways through which the queer subjects are compelled to regulate their own bodily movements and sentiments according to the politics of respectability. In this process, I seek to complicate the understanding of self-governance as an amalgam of crisscrossing, contradicting logics rather than a coherent, monolithic rationality increasingly characterized as neoliberal. Simultaneously, I strive to shed light upon the scene of queerness in Vietnam as an emergent site of self-governmentality comparable to the *suzhi* project in China, perpetuating the larger power structures that keep the citizen-subject bound to the nation.

The case of LGBT politics in Vietnam shows that the modality of self-governance bears multiple logics of selfhood, whose convergences and contradictions fashion the respectable queer particular to the local historical and cultural context. This concept of self-governance is derived from Foucault's theorization of governmentality and technologies of the self (1979, 1982), which stresses the power of expert knowledge and the liberal discourse of freedom, which produces the "autonomous subject of choice and self-identity" (Rose 1999, 46) whose very subjectification organizes their desires, consciousness, and behaviors. Although some scholars have identified these Foucauldian rationalities as neoliberal (for example, Nguyễn-võ 2008), such a system of governmentality must be contextualized in a specific cultural scene to reveal the mutations, modifications, and reinventions (Wacquant 2012; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). Heeding this critique, I attempt to contextualize the diffused power of self-

governance through the circuits of material and discursive technologies in the process of LGBT media production in Vietnam.

On this ground, my research has unveiled divergent modes of self-engineering coexisting in the system of governing the queer subjects at the heart of mainstream LGBT media in Vietnam. Unlike the neoliberal vision of the entrepreneurial, autonomous citizen-subject overcoming gender and sexual non-normativities through a project of self-improvement, I find the queer subject in Vietnam continuously grabbling with morally justified hierarchies and state authorities for the status of respectable citizenship. Deemed autonomous in the aspect of economic and educational success, the queer subject is nevertheless tied to the national collective in other interpersonal, moral, and affective aspects. In this way, the technologies of self-governance engender the respectable queer based on different modes of selfhood that are at once liberal and nonliberal, individualizing and collectivizing.

On this note, my argument builds upon the scholarship on the *suzhi* discourse in the context of China, which also highlights multifold cultural forces of self-cultivation serving to legitimize state power and gloss over social inequalities (Kipnis 2007). Yet I extend this literature into the terrain of queer studies by excavating queerness as a site of self-governmentality, epidemic of the larger processes of constructing the quality citizen for the nation. The scholarship has linked the blossoming of the *suzhi* discourse to the birth control and education policies in 1980s, which constructs the urban, middle-class only child as the quality citizen at the center of the national development project (Kipnis 2006; Anagnost 2004). However, these scholars have yet to analyze how this

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resignification of the family and the figure of the child redraws the boundaries of

normative genders and sexualities and thus informs the queer politics in the country. My

thesis examines the case of Vietnam to fill this gap by teasing out how the quality citizen-

subject is transposed onto the queer self, tethered to the relationships among the

individual, the family, and the national collective. I contend that in the process of crafting

themselves into the respectable citizen, the queer subject is refolded into the

heteronormative logic of the blood family, while the local version of LGBT politics

reproduces, instead of questioning, state power and structural inequalities.

Queer Politics of Invisibility: Affective Failures

In this thesis, I also highlight how the queer subjects rendered invisible in the grid of

respectability politics enact alternative modes of queer affect and relationalities. While

locating these alternative possibilities of queer politics in moments of failures when both

the individualizing and collectivizing logics of self-governance break apart, I turn to what

I call 'affective failures' in which the queer subjects' feelings stray away from the

affective pathways of respectability.

First, staying invisible in the matrix of LGBT politics allows the queer subjects to

veer off and contest the routes of respectability politics. I identify their refusal of LGBT

politics as the "failure to repeat" (Butler 1990, 192) the script of self-governmentality

which upholds LGBT politics of respectability. Though following Butler's theorization of

such failures as the subversive performances capable of exposing certain gender and

sexuality script as politically and socially constructed (1990), I deviate from Butler's

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emphasis on bodily acts and instead focus on affect. By paying attention to the affective failures of the queer subjects to align with the project of respectability, I meet their rejectionist modes of queerness in its muted, invisible form expressible only through emotions but not necessarily vocal speech or visible embodiments.

Thereby, I not only pinpoint everyday affect experienced by the queer subjects but also contextualize them in the local scene of Vietnam, highlighting how these affective failures work to destabilize the boundaries of respectable queerness in this society. Queer studies have taken on the task of theorizing the political efficacy of certain negative affect, including shame (Halperin and Traub 2009; Sedgwick 1993) and the lack of hope (Edelman 2004). However, my research attempts to show the idiosyncratic political vitality of the affect of shame – shamelessness, and hope – hopelessness within the multiple logics of queer respectability in Vietnam. In this case, shamelessness plays the negative affect that the queer subjects hold onto for alternative ways of living queer, while hopelessness enables them to reject the moral collective order centered on the blood family. Simultaneously, my thesis reaches beyond the realm of negative affect to grasp how everyday affect formed through lived experiences of female-exclusive intimacies moves the female queer subjects above the identity-based, respectable mode of queerness. By tending to these quotidian affective failures, I shed light on how these queer subjects begin to reimagine the queer futures in an identity-free, unrespectable, and ungovernable vocabulary.

Background of LGBT Politics in Vietnam

The last two decades have witnessed major changes in terms of the attitude of the Vietnamese state as well as the civil society toward the LGBT question. As near as in the early 2000s, homosexuality was still stigmatized, banned, and punished under the banner of the national campaign against social evils (Pham 2022). Yet the mainstream LGBT movement sprouted in Vietnam around the year 2008 with the establishment of many non-governmental organizations working on LGBT rights, including iSEE and ICS, most of whom receive and sustain strong ties with foreign sponsors of funding, personnel, and other resources (Pham 2022; Newton 2016). On the legal front, the Vietnamese state has recognized transgender people in 2015 and is currently drafting the Transgender Rights Law. Though not yet legalized, same-sex marriage has been on the agenda of LGBT NGOs in the country since 2013 and was officially decriminalized with the 2014 revision of Marriage and Family Law (Pham 2022).

My thesis enfolds these multifold changes within the analysis of media environments in Vietnam, which have also shifted from limited and negative visibility of queer people to abundant and positive representations (Faludi 2016). The proliferation of queer media in the country ranges from high-production TV shows broadcast on national channels, to commercial films transverse across the national borders, to grassroot-produced social media content. The talk show whose production processes I investigate in this thesis is part of this wave of queer cultural products washing over Vietnam in the last decade.

Queer Ethnography in Vietnam: Methods

This thesis draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam from July 2023 to September 2023 in Vietnam utilizing two main methods.

First, I conducted 08 semi-formal interviews with the queer audiences of LGBT TV shows across different provinces in Vietnam, who were recruited through the snowballing method. My goal of these interviews was to juxtapose the power dynamics of media production with the counterhegemonic vitality of queer spectatorship. Snowball sampling allowed me to have 8 queer participants join the research without having to reassert the essentializing, identity-based ways of knowing queerness in this non-Western context. Some of the first participants were introduced to me through my established contact with the queer communities in the country, which enabled them to partake in the research without having to identify with any identity labels I myself struggled to incorporate in my work. Other participants were queer friends I have long acquainted from multiple communities gathering under the unstable banner of "quể" (queer), "bê-đê," or "lét." The participants were residing in Hanoi, Đà Lạt and HCMC in Vietnam, which meant that I was only able to do 6 interviews in person and the other 2 via video calling. Ranging from the age of 22 to 30, these participants shall fall in the population group most likely to watch these TV shows on their personal devices via social media platforms. All the participants embody either femininity or transfemininity to a certain extent. Due to the rippling effects of this recruitment method, none of my interview participants ended up embodying cis, gay masculinity. In many ways, the links among my queer participants, forged not in LGBT identity-based terms but in non-normative

pathways of desires, embodiments, and sociality, have brought my research in the proximity of feminist, radical queer life in Vietnam. The interviews, each lasting from 60 to 90 minutes, were designed to contextualize the practices of queer spectatorship among my participants within their broader lived experiences of gender and sexual non-normativity in Vietnamese society.

Second, I carried out participant-observation at the filming site of "A Bright LGBT Life," a LGBT TV talk show aired on HTV2 (Ho Chi Minh TV channel), which is located in District 7, HCMC, Vietnam. CCC is a giant media conglomerate with transnational offices in Vietnam, Europe, and the United States. The main branches of CCC in Vietnam can be found in both HCMC and Hanoi, and the building in District 7 where I conducted ethnographic work was home to all the production teams and filming crew in the South of the country.

I was able to draw "thick description" (Geertz 1973) from two weeks of working as an intern for the production of "A Bright LGBT Life" at CCC. I was able to attend four filming sessions, where I got to meet and interact with the core personnel of "A Bright LGBT Life." I also spent a significant amount of time with different production team members in their working space, in the cafeteria, and in the "livestreaming room," which is another space on the first floor where the team members did some of the post-filming steps, including editing. During this time, I helped the team members with any small tasks in the production processes, including communicating among the team members on the set, assisting the queer participants to prepare for filming, helping with preliminary interviews of the participants, and helping with editing the raw footage.

However, the process of gaining and maintaining access to this ethnographic site complicated my positionality as the researcher, which engendered a mode of reflexivity that found its way into my critiques of the gender, class, and moral hierarchies that govern queer life. First, I relied on my personal networks, or my social capital, to approach interlocutors in my ethnographic site. After my efforts to contact the staff at CCC through emails, phones, and social media failed, I resorted to intermediary people who have established connections with staff at CCC. Soon after, I got in touch with Nhung, an employee working in human resources at CCC, who helped deliver my messages to the director of "A Bright LGBT Life" and arrange my research at the company. However, Hằng, the team member I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, asked for a face-to-face interview with me before agreeing to my request. When I met Hằng for this interview on August 21, 2023, she explained that this served almost as a preliminary screening of my intentions. Hằng asked me to elaborate on my research work and my plans of joining the CCC staff. Above all, she dived deep into my biography, including my hometown, my educational background, etc., with details about which high school I went to, where I did my undergraduate study, and which schools in the U.S. I was attending. After I disclosed to her such information, Hằng showed approval of my stay at CCC and answered my questions about the goals, development history, and production status of "A Bright LGBT Life."

In a nutshell, I was able to acquire access to the ethnographic site due to the perceived high social status I embodied as a researcher educated outside Vietnam, which afforded me more intellectual currency than her own staff:

"I think it would be amazing to have you join the team of "A Bright LGBT Life."

You are much smarter and more mature than the current team members because of

your work as a researcher. The members still think in a shallow and naive way,

you know? They would have to learn from you."

Not simply comparing me to the team members, Hằng was implicitly comparing

me to the queer people she described as "freakish" or "not male, not female" at other

points in this interview. The quote at the beginning of the thesis also revealed her

perception of the distinctions between "people like me" who work in high-status

professions and queer folks doing lower-status jobs. Embodying class privileges and

gender normativity, I found myself playing the respectable queer I myself was critiquing.

Such positionality complicated the politics of knowledge production that I engaged in,

blurring the relationship between the knower and the known in my research. On that note,

I utilized the access to the ethnographic site to perform the kind of "reflexivity" or

"intersubjectivity" that feminist ethnographers have argued for to configure nuanced

subject positions of knowing (Harding 1986; Code 1991; Grosz 1993). In other words, I

refused to assume the 'god-like' view of a detached, neutral observer and instead, married

my own experiences into the lived realities of queer folks in my research to tease out the

class, gender, and cultural-moral principles that commonly govern our life. In general, the

relationship between me as the ethnographer and the ethnographic site constitutes and

shapes the critical analyses of the respectability politics enacted on the grounds of CCC's

filming complex as I was forced to embody the respectability politics to gain access.

Structure of Thesis

I proceed by laying out the technological and spatial arrangements of the production processes in Chapter 1, which engender the heterosexual gaze at the core of "A Bright LGBT Life." This heterosexual gaze, which privileges the production team members and the presumably heteronormative public as the ones who see, overshadows the lived realities and subjectivities of the queer subjects on and off screen. This dominant gaze is facilitated by what I called the "straight camera," or the organization of different technologies and spaces involved in the processes of recruiting, scripting, filming, and editing, which magnified the look of the heterosexual producers at the queer subjects. I argue that it is this heterosexual gaze behind the camera that undergirds the politics of respectability as the main governing principle of the good queer life in this space.

The logic of respectability politics will be dissected in multiple chapters. Starting with Chapter 2, the respectable queer appears with a clearly known and named LGBT identity category, essentialized to be an innate fact of the queer self. In the context of Vietnam, this form of knowing one's identities regulates the queer subjects through the technologies of self-engineering. At the same time, this form of knowing duplicates the respectable queer as the modern queer through what Ong (2006) called the governmentality-as-ecology strategy, or the technologies of aligning material resources in the metropolis of HCMC with the production of modern queer subjecthood. Therefore, the good queer life is fashioned through a project of both individual identity and the urban collective.

The respectable queer has a different face in Chapter 3. By zooming into the practices of post-filming editing, this chapter shows how the affect of shame works to discipline queer subjects in alignment with both the individualizing project of self-governance and the collectivizing practices of self-criticism. The self-critical queer is able to attain a 'good life' through a mode of belonging in the heteronormative public, which effectively masks intersectional inequalities as individual humiliation rather than classed and gendered oppression. I pay special heed to the transgressive embodiments of shamelessness in the filming site, which reclaims a form of care and a space of (dis)belonging that exposed such structural injustice.

Chapter 4 continues to paint the respectable queer as part of the normative blood-based family. This chapter focuses on different practices of rescripting that took place before and during the filming sessions to pinpoint the logics of self-governance in producing the queer self. I argue that the good queer life is wrapped within what I call "circular reproductive futurism" that starts and ends with the blood family. The respectable queer in this context is always traced back through a heteronormative, patrilineal genealogy and imagined living for such family reunion. The respectable queer, thereby, is kept hopeful of an illusionary future of collective harmony. However, I take a close look at the moments of failures on the filming set, in which the queer subjects used the affect of hopelessness to innovate transgressive modes of queer kin illegible in such a reproductive temporality.

Finally, Chapter 5 turns to the question of queer spectatorship by analyzing the interviews with queer audiences of LGBT TV shows in Vietnam. This chapter will

demonstrate the politics of refusal enacted by these queer participants, who not only reject LGBT identifications but also repudiate the logic of respectability politics enveloping the mainstream queer media. In lieu of these mainstream shows, the queer participants turn to inter-Asian, grassroot-produced, and female-exclusive media for quotidian and utopian modalities of queerness. In this way, the sentiment of dissatisfaction with these TV shows among all the participants is generative of feminist queer desires, relationalities, and futurity, recuperating the unintelligible, shameless, and hopeless queers.

CHAPTER 1

STRAIGHT CAMERA: HETEROSEXUAL GAZE IN LGBT REPRESENTATIONS

"The LGBT people already make up an indispensable part of the society. Even though, admittedly, 90% of the production team saw them as *kỳ dị* (freakish), *trai không ra trai gái không ra gái* (not female, not male), *nhạy cảm quá đà* (overly sensitive), we cannot shut them out of our life. As a media company, we must pioneer to bring their stories to the audience."

A production team member told me the first day I came to the headquarter of CCC, a media giant stationed in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. This conversation marked my first encounter with the production team of "A Bright LGBT Life," a talk show dedicated to telling the stories of LGBT participants, broadcast on a significant provincial TV channel as well as on all social media platforms since 2018 until now. This statement emboldens the heterosexual – queer divide that articulates an imagination of a unified "us" against "them" among the production team of the show. The queer body us still read as the Other in the show, though recuperated through what the member called "indispensability." The statement thus illuminates the ambivalence that the show has in relation to queer politics, simultaneously driving queer bodies into life while rendering queer life only intelligible under the heterosexual gaze. Such ambivalence lies at the heart of this chapter.

In this chapter, I will analyze the heterosexual gaze embedded in the respectability politics of LGBT media production in Vietnam with a focus on technological and spatial practices. In particular, I will offer a panorama of the goals, production technologies,

personnel, and spatial arrangements of the filming processes. I argue that the heterosexual

gaze at the core of this media production complex imbues the queer body with life yet

disciplines queer life through the hetero - queer binary. On the one hand, queer life

escapes the realm of "impossible desires" that renders queerness unintelligible to the

national space (Gopinath 2005) through *social realism* as a system of meanings (Nguyễn-

võ 2008). Yet such life is subjected to the heterosexual gaze, which engenders the

respectable queer fleshed out under class, gender, and moral hierarchies. The

heterosexual gaze in this context thus polices the respectable queer subject through

different discursive and spatial technologies. In this vein, I attempt to tease out how the

heterosexual gaze functions to carve out spaces for queer life under the market-socialist

context beyond the colonial or Western discourses of medical sexology. At the same time,

I sustain a nuanced critique of how this way of "looking" undergirds the respectability

politics that reasserts class and heteronormative inequalities. Before directly addressing

the force of respectability politics in crafting LGBT representations in subsequent

chapters, I shall spend this chapter laying out the technological and discursive conditions

of these media processes, which enabled and to some extent explained how the politics of

respectability came to structure the construction of LGBT representations in Vietnamese

TV shows.

Queer Biopolitics, Heterosexual Gaze, and Social Realism

Queer life falls into the grid of biopolitical governmentality that has been extensively

theorized by Foucault (1979) as the governance of citizen subjects through and in the

body, but the case of market-socialism such as Vietnam beckons critical interventions in the Western scholarship. A contextualized analysis on queer biopolitics in Vietnam shall deviate from the characterization of this governance regime either in terms of medical sexology, thus contesting the colonial and Western-centric knowledge systems that have contoured these inquiries. In this section, I shall interweave the theoretical framework of social realism, articulated specifically for the case of Vietnam, and the heterosexual gaze, adapted from critical visual studies, to flesh out how queer life is simultaneously enabled and restrained under LGBT media production.

To begin with, the scholarship contends that queer life becomes legible through the ideology of biological and psychological essentialism underlying the medical discourse on sexology prominent in the 19th and 20th century Euro-American social imaginaries. Under this discourse, transsexuality was pathologized under the label of gender dysphoria (Amin 2022). This medical discourse represents a colonial system of knowing genders in Southeast Asia when European expert knowledge worked to discipline the colonized subjects through co-constitutive gender, class, and racial hierarchies. On the one hand, earlier research has crystallized how Western systems of gender binary and "innate gender" established colonial power relations by relegating non-normative practices of genders and sexualities in Southeast Asia to their inferior status as barbaric, backward, and uncivilized (Proschan 2002; Blackwood 2005). On the other hand, the afterlives of such colonial knowledge on gender and sexuality also haunted the post-colonial regimes of governmentality (Tran 2014; Hegarty 2022). The transmittance of 19th century European medical discourses on sexology into Vietnam through health

experts in the 2000s engendered the knowledge system that validated concepts of gender inversion and thus marked homosexuality as a disorder. Queer life thus was governed through the biopolitics of sexology, which policed the queer body through medically justified corporeal diagnoses and transformations.

However, an uncritical export of these scholarships into a non-Western, post-colonial context like Vietnam risks restipulating the colonial or Western knowledge system of medical sexology as the dominant ways of knowing genders and sexualities in the local scene. Not only have post-colonial late socialist developments formulated new modes of knowledge production and dissemination, but any theorizations on the globalization of neoliberal values must also wrestle with extant local cultural-moral forces of late socialism. In the case of Vietnam, Đổi Mới, or the policy of economic renovation, benchmarked various flows of political, social, and cultural changes, invigorating new and renewed systems of knowledge about genders and sexualities (Werner 2002; Pettus 2003).

Instead of recycling the conventional route of medical sexology, this chapter illustrates how the force of socialist realism, delivered through the heterosexual gaze, simultaneously redeem and constrain queer life in Vietnam. From the ideological backbone of Vietnamese revolutionary art to commercial pop cultures in the 200os, social realism explained how neoliberal governance augmented state control over the discursive and material shapes of femininity (Nguyễn-võ 2008). Socialist realism could be defined as a specific mode of representing a social picture as empirically true, and when married to socialist literatures, naturalizing the role of the socialist Party/state as the sole agent of

history. This genre authorized the representations of social realities (the Real) and cultural truths (the True) during revolutionary periods (1950s onwards) (Nguyễn-võ 2008, 185-214). When remobilized into a commercial brand of social realism, this genre constructed market "hidden reality" through the markers of the feminine, which reproduced desires for consumption as natural, though dangerous (Nguyễn-võ 2008, 215-242). Paying heed to how this genre provided new technologies of governing queer life in Vietnam, I will show how the post-socialist state utilizes this means to discipline the queer subjects. Thereby, this chapter seeks to locate livable spaces for the queer body outside the totality of (neo)colonial ideology and materiality, as well as provincialize queer critiques of neoliberal capitalism to account for late socialist sociocultural rhythms.

However, this chapter seeks to elucidate how this genre of meanings is subsumed under the overarching heterosexual gaze that ties queer life to the Other. The camera gaze, in particular, enacts the power dynamics that rationalize and sustain the domination of those who see over those who are seen. The camera gaze was first interrogated as enabling the power of photography to represent truths and objectify the Other (Tagg 1993; Sontag 2003). Studied in the colonial contexts, the camera gaze captured the West as "the historifiable" agent of human developments and civilizations, while constructing the racially Other as "the ethnographiable" primitive Other without history and outside of modernity (Rony 1996). Coining the concept of "visual biopolitics," Rony (2022) articulated how such power relations mapped onto the ways we see the racialized bodies, determining who is worthy or unworthy of life. Building upon this framework of visual biopolitics, I propose the concept of the "straight camera" to explore how

heteronormativity is inscribed onto the ways the queer bodies are shown and seen on LGBT TV shows. As the gaze of the heterosexual production team is privileged over the self-narratives of the queer participants, the kind of queer life recuperated under the genre of social realism is nonetheless hinged upon the fashioning of the queer Other. By examining the production processes step by step, I will illustrate the technologies and the spatiality of the heterosexual gaze that allow such reproduction of heteronormative power dynamics on and off the filming site.

Social Realism: Production of Queer Life

LGBT media in Vietnam carves out spaces for queer life under the genre of social realism, which naturalizes the scenes of queer desires and embodiments as a part of Vietnamese reality. Following Nguyễn-võ's framework (2008), I argue that the production of LGBT media in this local context enfolds queer life in the "logic of expose," emphasizing queer existence as a "hidden reality" breaking free under market liberty, while the media plays the role of "uncovering" this extant reality of queerness. I draw on ethnographic data at the filming site and semi-formal interviews with the production team members to demonstrate this process.

First, the veins of social realism run directly in the goals of the show that a core member articulated for me during our interview. The interview took place on the very first day when I came to the building of CCC company, which was located in a huge corporate complex in District 7, Ho Chi Minh city. Sitting in a small meeting room with a translucent window looking out at the employees' quarter, the member shared with me

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about the overarching goals of the production team in initiating "A Bright LGBT Life."
First of all, she claimed that the show aimed to deliver a *thực tế* (realistic) look into the
LGBT community by pitching the story told by LGBT participants themselves to the
audience as the Real: "*Thực tế* means that we respect real-life stories of the participants.
We do not force them to decorate or invent new details for their stories." Such definition
of *thực tế* is informed by the experiences of interactions, clashes, and intimacies with
LGBT people within the company itself.

> "The show was born out of the internal affairs at CCC. Within the company, we
> encountered those who are different from us, those who are stuck between males
> and females (*trai không ra trai gái không ra gái*). We realized that they also have
> a life in which they experience love, hatred, anger, etc. yet lack a space to share
> those feelings. We believe that the experiences we had in our company are also
> prevalent in wider society. *These people are already part of our population, and*
> *we might as well accept them.* That thought prompted us to build the show into a
> reliable space for these people to share their real stories," explained by the same
> member.

The validation of queer life through media representations is predicated on the act
of exposing the Real about the queer subjects, as part of the perceived reality of the larger
Vietnamese society. By claiming that queer bodies already occupy "part of our
population" regardless of public denial or acceptance, the team member encoded queer
existence as an "ethnographic fact of life," a concept Powell (2016, 93) uses to dissect the
technologies of gay visibility in queer films. This sentiment resonates with the team

member's comment that "[the] LGBT people already make up an indispensable part of the society" that I quoted at the beginning of the chapter. However, while Powell (2016) critiques the politics of gay visibility as enshrining gay liberation within Enlightenment values of rationality and universalism, the ethnographic factualization of queer existence in the local context of Vietnam rests on the "performance of discovery" constituting the historical Real in the vein of socialist realism (Nguyễn-võ 2008, 218). On the one hand, instead of accentuating gay visibility in public spaces, the production team focused on the interiority of the queer bodies. Indeed, the incorporation of queer existence into social reality is embedded in the language of shared internal feelings. By indicating that the production team "realized that [LGBT people] also have a life in which they experience love, hatred, anger, etc.," the crew constructed a scene of *uncovering* the internal lifeworlds within the queer body, and thereby *finding* that the queer person is also a human inside. Echoing the overarching theme that shapes the entire show, the (re)enactment of "coming out" is staged not only in the conventional sense of revealing one's sexual identity to the public world, but more importantly in service of verifying the Real queer existence, as a fellow human belonging to the same society, unveiled through media representations.

At the same time, this local scene deviates from the Western interpellation of gay life into what Powell (2016) considers post-liberation positivity, which exclusively affirms a "masculinist image of gay health" (104), or the "healthy, white, masculinist, active men in pursuit of a better future for themselves as individuals" (107). Instead, the case of Vietnam showed an embrace of queer monstrosity and deviancy alongside the

validation of queer life, when the production team gave multiple statements about the abnormal queer body as freakish *(kỳ dị)*, overly sensitive (*nhạy cảm quá đà),* and stuck between males and females (*trai không ra trai gái không ra gái*). This ambivalence echoes how Nguyễn-võ (2008) characterizes the genre of social realism as representation freedom as both desirable and vicious. In other words, the logic that renders queer life intelligible is not that gayness is a universal, ahistorical, timeless fact which must be externalized for positive recognition. Instead, the queer person is discovered to be already internal to this contemporary social reality, regardless of the social vices they embody.

Straight Camera: Disciplining of the Queer Body through the Heterosexual Gaze
While social realism as a genre of meaning-making allows spaces for queer life, LGBT media in Vietnam also constrains such life by containing it within the heterosexual gaze enacted through technological and spatial practices. As the "straight camera" captures the queer subjects in their differences understood through the hetero – queer binary, the queer bodies still play the Other in the show.

To begin with, the personnel arrangements of "A Bright LGBT Life" embodies the dominant heteronormative gaze imposed upon the queer participants. Overall, the team works under a director of production, who is in charge of designing the general goals, direction, and format of the show. A team leader, who keeps an overarching monitoring eye over every production step, reports directly to the director of production. Another important member is the director on set, who has expertise in filming and is responsible for leading and coordinating the real-time filming processes, which includes

giving directions to the cameramen, hosts, and participants on set. The team also consists of three to four editors, who participate in recruiting LGBT participants, conducting preliminary interviews with the participants, building the script for each show, giving instructions to the hosts during the filming sessions, and editing the filmed materials afterward. Most of the team members, except for one, chose to identify themselves as heterosexual or perceived the queer participants on the show as different from themselves. In this way, the team performed the "hetero/queer divide" that Cohen (2005, 31) critiqued as singularizing sexual identifications as the primary frame of politics, failing to integrate intersectionality to interrogate the interlocking regimes of race, class, and citizenship in engineering heteronormative powers. During the time I spent with the team, the members made constant use of us – them language to distinguish between themselves and the queer participants, strengthening the divide between the heterosexual who see and the queer who is seen. In other words, the domination of a heteronormative team in queer TV set the stage for other technologies of production to mark the queer bodies on set and on screen as the objectified Other.

The production team also imposed the heteronormative gaze upon the queer bodies through the technology of recruiting, (re)scripting, teleprompting/cueing, and editing. First, the process of recruitment had the team members "infiltrate" (*núp lùm*) Facebook groups for Vietnamese gay, trans, queer people to find potential participants for the show. Given that Facebook is the most widely used social media platform among Vietnamese people, joining different queer communities on Facebook was a strategy aimed at identifying as many potential participants as possible. However, by using the

term "infiltrate," the team member who told me about the recruitment process revealed how she herself occupied the status of an outsider looking at the queer bodies they presented on TV. The member also constantly felt like she could not understand the cultures of these groups and had a hard time approaching the "right" participants. As a noticeable example, this member complained to me about the difficulty of finding a "top" for the show, a term in opposition to "bottom," usually used to refer to a cis, gay man identifying with the dominant, masculinist role in a male-male couple. The member was assigned this task due to the predominance of effeminate gay men on the show, which was believed to be resolved with the inclusion of more masculine or "top" gay men. The difficulty rooted in the fact that she could not identify such "top" quality from merely looking at the Facebook profiles in these groups, as well as that many gay men refused to describe themselves as either of the two categories. While the top – bottom binary tarnished homosexuality with diaristic understandings of genders as a coupledom of masculinity and femininity, the impulse to represent tops and bottoms equally on TV bespoke how the inclusionist motor of media visibility could work to reaffirm heteronormativity instead of challenging it. Evidently, this recruitment procedure was pregnant with normative assumptions of a heterosexual body gazing voyeuristically into the queer communities, who attempted to bend local queer cultures to the knowledge system ridden of heteronormativity and gender binary. In other words, the recruitment process served as the first layer of filtering LGBT representations in the show through a heterosexual gaze uninterested in the lived realities of queerness playing out beyond their camera.

Secondly, the (re)scripting step that took place after recruitment also extended the heterosexual gaze into molding the self-narratives of the queer subjects. After selecting a potential participant, the editors would arrange a preliminary interview with the potential participant through video calls or in person. This early interview is designed to extract the "story" of the potential participants for review and scriptwriting later. The editors would be in charge of piecing together a coherent narrative from this preliminary conversation with the potential participant, which they then present to the director for the final decision of whether to include the participant's story in the show. During this process, the editors and the director would make critical decisions regarding which parts of this initial conversation would be kept, and which parts omitted from the final interview on set. The queer participants were never informed of these changes in the narratives until they were already in the process of filming. As one team member disclosed to me, one criterion used to evaluate this preliminary interview was the originality of the story, or the degree to which it could be seen as "novel and strange (*mới lạ*)": "For example, everyone could tell the same story of growing up, wanting to play with dolls instead of cars, and realizing that they are transgender. That story is too boring." The emphasis on originality or unfamiliarity reveals the process of packaging "difference" into consumption goods for the audiences. Difference is thus accentuated to embolden a sense of "us" among the mass audiences, who are expected to be surprised and thus counter-identify with the queer bodies on screen. This practice of "rescripting," while manipulated the self-narratives of the queer participants into palatable stories for the heteronormative

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audiences, naturalized the notion of innate difference between the heterosexual body and the queer body.

Thirdly, the production team also held power over which narratives were actually told on the filming set. During the filming sessions, the editor would type out their prepared questions onto the computer screen, which then appear in the teleprompter in the filming site and serve as instructions for the hosts. Throughout this process, the director on set would follow the progress of the real-time conversation between the hosts and participants closely with a view to modifying the instructions on the editor's computer in ways that lean naturally into the conversation and simultaneously gear it toward the predetermined direction sketched out by the four foundational questions mentioned above. Upon surprising moments when the participants go out of script, the director on set and the editor, therefore, make on-the-spot decisions on which parts of the conversation to expand or cut short. The team members, as a result, were able to filter the general direction and tone of the queer narratives through their normative lens. In later chapters, I would delve deeper into how this heterosexual gaze embedded in the practice of teleprompting enabled the production team to police the respectable queer on set in conformity with class, gender, and moral hierarchies.

Finally, the heteronormative gaze was further reinforced during the editing process, in which the editors would produce a sanitized version of the film from the raw materials filmed at the site. This step usually requires the editors to work independently with the purpose of fitting the film into a 30-minute time frame, truncating part considered unnecessary, erroneous, sensitive, or triggering. The goal of this editing stage

is to shrink the filmed materials into shorter videos without compromising the backbone of the story, which granted the production team even more power over twisting self-narratives of the queer participants to their taste. At the same time, post-filming editing included the task of fragmenting the long video into social media-friendly short clips, used as hooks or highlights for the show. These short reels became the way many audiences access the show on their own Facebook, YouTube, and especially TikTok feed. Overall, these editing practices work to privilege the heterosexual gaze, which determines the worthy, important, and unnecessary parts of the queer narratives.
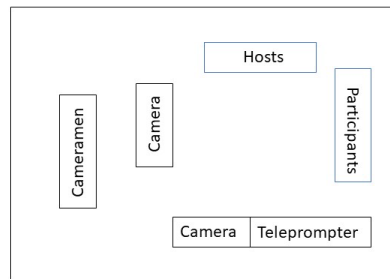

Figure 1. Map of the Filming Site of "A Bright LGBT Life"

Moreover, the hetero-queer divide is reinstated through spatial practices on the filming set. The space of the filming site continues to demarcate the hetero-queer divide through the distribution of the gaze, and material and social labor. First, the space of the filming site (Map 1) is punctuated with the camera gaze and the lighting set-up, both of which performs the technologies of visibility that extends the heteronormative gaze imposed upon the queer body. Two cameras are placed in the filming site, one facing the queer participants and one facing the hosts of the show. The close-up images of faces captured by these cameras are shown on the monitor placed in front of the director on set

in the backstage studio (Map 2). The camera gaze, in this way, draws its "evidential force" (Tagg 1993, 4) from the history of photographic realism to establish a causal link between the queer bodies visible on screen and their social, emotional, and physical state of liberation. Following Horeck's (2007) analysis of the visual close-ups, the camera close-ups turned queer faces into "a text to be read," staging a "visual verification" of their simultaneous internal abnormality and humanity. The camera gaze also interacts with the lighting set-up to reinforce the power relations between the gazer and the gazed upon in this case. While the bright artificial lighting illuminates the filming set where the hosts and the queer participants sat, the cameramen comprising of four to five people who organized the filming angles according to the instruction of the director on set were in the shadow with no lighting. The use of bright lighting elucidates what Powell (2016) terms "the mechanics of gay visibility," which produces the unveiled/coming-out queer body in the open public spaces. The promise of visibility implicit in the lighting set-up, however, is contrasted with the darkness and distance that obscured the heteronormative gaze upon the queer bodies. Not only were the cameramen able to look at the queer participants under the guise of the camera, but the production crew who were monitoring every small gesture and expression of the queer participants were tucked away in the backstage studio located separately from the filming site (Map 3). Altogether the camera and lighting set-up facilitated the "straight camera" which brought the queer bodies under the heterosexual gaze to be scanned for evidence of both suffering and liberation.
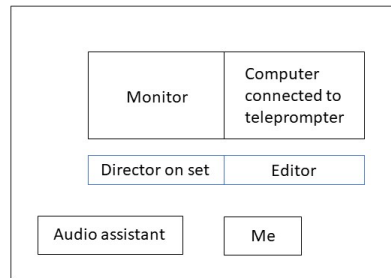
Figure 2. Map of the Backstage Studio

In this sense, the technologies of the camera gaze performed an objectifying process that Sontag (2003) described as "[bringing] the viewer too close" while the Other is "regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone who also sees." What Sontag called the "inevitability of tragedy" historically marking the exoticized, colonized bodies (2003) could be seen scaffolding the gaze of the production team upon the queer bodies from the backstage studio. In this backstage space, the director on set would monitor different frames caught by multiple cameras in the filming site and make decisions on which frames to include at what time. The director on set had the choice (and usually chose to) to zoom into tearful, grieving faces of the queer participants when they recounted their stories. The sufferings of the queer bodies captured on the camera, therefore, played into the voyeuristic consumption of the distanced seer, whose safe distance from the subject allowed them to see the Other as "dead or dying" (Sontag 2003). The camera gaze, concealed through the lighting and spatial set-up, thus enacted the power relations between the heterosexual bodies who see and the queer bodies who are seen.
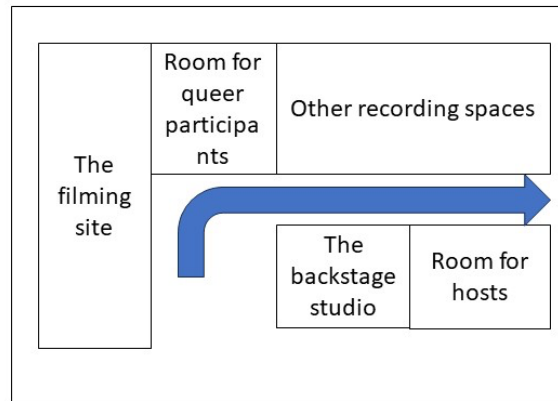
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Figure 3. Map of the Recording Complex at CCC

Furthermore, the spatial orientations that structure the whole filming complex located on the ground floor of the media company (Map 3) reinscribes the hetero-queer divide as well as class hierarchies, which shrinks queer life into isolation, quietness, and shadows. I draw specifically on Ahmed's framework of (sexual) orientations (2007) to demonstrate these power dynamics, while pinpointing what Gopinath (2018) called "queer disorientations" to vitalize ways the queer bodies destabilize these power hierarchies. First, the separation between the queer participants, dwelling in the left-corner room, and the production team, all dwelling in the backstage studio, shape the orientations with which the bodies inhabit the space of the filming complex and thereby shape the bodies themselves. The alignment between space and body is at the core of Ahmed's concept of bodily dwelling, in which "bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling" (2007, 9). Ahmed also reminds us that such bodily dwelling is deeply interwoven into interlocking power regimes, as "bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into

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space, as an extension that differentiates between left and right, front and behind, up and down, as well as near and far" (2007, 5). The arrow I inserted in Map 3 represented such orientations of bodily spatial extensions in the space for a normative body, which I identify as the heteronormative or homonormative bodies of the production team member and the hosts. This not only signifies the pathways used by these bodies to facilitate the production of the show, but also produces the in-line body who can dwell into this space with straightness. In this spatial orientation, the queer bodies fall into "the field of unreachable objects" (Ahmed 2007) which excluded them from the social, bodily, and affective intimacies unfolding among the production team and the hosts elsewhere in the complex. Ahmed also termed this the "field of heterosexual objects" (2007) in which the normative body is delimited to encounter other normative bodies on their course of navigating the filming space, while the queer body is rendered out of reach, out of place, and thereby lost. Evidently, throughout the four filming sessions when I was able to join the production team, the editors, the director on set, and the hosts joyfully engaged in conversations and shared food and drinks. The team members frequently joined the hosts in their room, while they all bumped into one another on the pathway following the arrow in the map. On my own way navigating the filming complex, I saw the queer participants glancing silently from their room at the frantic bodies following this pathway without engaging in the intimacies created behind the scenes. In other words, the spatial practices of proximity and movements across the filming complex consolidated the hetero-queer divide that continued Othering the queer bodies from a sense of emplacement, belonging, and intimacy.

Simultaneously, differential arrangements of the room for the hosts and that for queer participants bespeak the uneven distribution of material resources and labor that constitutes class inequalities. While the hosts of the show are LGBT public figures selected by the team to lead the talk show, they inhabit a space designed differently from the room for queer participants. The room of the hosts was well-lit, equipped with conveniences such as the iron, the clothing rack, mirrors, etc., and provided with food and refreshments, none of which was made available in the room for queer participants. Instead, the latter was a space reappropriated from an old storage room still stuffed with discarded, forgotten, and redundant objects. In other words, the heteronormative space of the filming site also became a space of class hierarchy, which gave us insights into how the heterosexual gaze underpinned the politics of respectability in fashioning LGBT representations in this TV show.

However, the same space of the disposed and the mundane that queer participants occupied also bears trace of what Gopinath (2018) framed as "queer regions," or subnational and non-metronormative spaces allowing queer relationalities and intimacies unintelligible within the ultra-white "global gay" imaginary. At the filming set, this disused storage room became the site of unthinkable collision between queer participants from disparate time-space, regardless of their divergent professions, residence places, or hometowns. These usual markers of class status, modern subjecthood, and belonging to the national identity got transgressed in this "wasted or anachronistic spaces" (Gopinath 2018: 82) where the queer bodies are disoriented from the normative fantasies of middle-class success and assimilationist LGBT politics. The gay man who has succeeded as a

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singer in Ho Chi Minh city mingled with the queer person who migrated from the rural area into Ho Chi Minh city to sell rice paper crepes (*bánh tráng*), and with the transgender woman who was working as a waitress at a restaurant. The distinctions between rural – urban, lower – upper class, and gender normativity – non normativity fell away at the marginal spaces of the storage room. Instead, the queer subjects find themselves reoriented to alternative queer sociality and futurity exceeding the paradigm of respectable visibility.

Overall, the production of this TV show compels the queer bodies to inhabit life crafted for and by the heterosexual gaze. On the one hand, queer life acquires meanings through the genre of social realism, which represents queer existence as a social reality independent from biological or psychological essentialism. The genre stages the show as a performance of discovery, uncovering the internal human nature of the queer bodies instead of their public-facing visibility, yet not forgoing the representations of queer monstrosity. On the other hand, the technologies and spatiality of media production empower the heterosexual gaze that enclose queer life within the dominant ring of class and gender respectability. Those falling on the margins of these power structures find themselves loitering in darkness, isolation, among hubris. Nevertheless, the spatial practices at the filming site also illustrate how the queer bodies appropriate the forgotten, disused, and wasted spaces for alternative queer relationalities and futurity. The transgressive sociality formed among them in the abandoned, out-of-reach storage room coalesces into a form of queer disorientations disarrayed from normative power relations.

CHAPTER 2

WHICH LETTER ARE YOU?: DISCIPLINING ESSENTIALIST LGBT IDENTITY

"Which letter are you out of LGBT?" (*Em thuộc chữ cái nào trong LGBT?*)

"I am a tomboi."

"No, tomboi is just a boyish style of a girl. Many people misunderstand (*hiểu nhầm)* it as a gender identity. You must be a transguy."

This conversation segued into a longer talk between the hosts of "A Bright LGBT Life" and the queer participant they had on the show that day. Having "diagnosed" the tomboi participant with their "true gender identity," the hosts smoothly marched on with a deeper dig into the stories of how they had to bear a misfit with their body, how they mistook themselves as something else (a lesbian, a tomboi), and how they finally discovered their true identity (transguy). It is almost too easy to mistake this talk for any other episodes where the show welcomed a queer participant identified as transgender, as they all slip into a familiar script, a mass prescription, dubbing the life stories of queer folks in nearly identical beats. Tomboi or tomboy is a term widely used by queer folks across Southeast Asia to lend visibility to those cultivating a body leaning into masculinity without rejecting femininity completely. This self-narrative signifies a uniquely "hybrid identity" (Sinnott 2004) marrying local configurations of genders with linguistic expressions elsewhere. Meanwhile, transguy carries the epistemological binary of cisgender and transgender, arising from Euro-American division of mind-body and nature-culture articulating gender (non)normativity (Amin 2022). These dichotomies had rationalized

the colonial logic of racialized governance in Southeast Asia and later developed a complex relationship with the post-colonial state-building projects (Hegarty 2022). The desires of the hosts to correct queer identifications in this instance, therefore, seeks to supersede the creative self-knowledge of non-normative genders with reproduced packages of essentialized genders, wrapped in acts of policing and fashioning a form of modern selfhood hinged upon a true way of being queer.

This chapter shall demonstrate the fashioning of essential LGBT identities in the production of "A Bright LGBT Life," zooming into the practices of scripting and teleprompting as well as the off-screen interactions among the production team members and the queer participants. I formulate a critique of both the multiple logics of self-governance and the national project of producing the modern citizen-subject in this local terrain. I contend that essential LGBT identifications increasingly signify modern selfhood and justify the uneven distribution of development across subnation spaces, especially between urban and rural places. By focusing on the affect of certainty and the form of knowing that invests in efficacious LGBT identifications in this space, I analyze the affective site of power wrestling, where the borrowing of LGBT identity politics by non-Western, developmentalist states must grapple with various ever-changing processes of self-reinventions not necessarily conforming to the Western liberal subject.

Governance of the Real and Politics of Knowing

This chapter zooms into the place of self-knowledge in the structure of governmentality over queer life. With a focus on the governance of queer life, I will build upon Aihwa

Ong's theorization of neoliberalism as the technologies of subjection and subjectivity (2006) and Nguyễn-võ's extension of this theory in the Vietnamese context (2008). The construction of LGBT identities in the media production space is thus engendered by a process of self-regulation facilitated by the regime of knowledge, expertise, and rationality.

In this media production setting, LGBT identities constitute what Nguyen-vo (2008) considers the Real, pieced together by a structure of governance predicated not upon forceful repression but upon a coupling of freedom and knowledge production. Expanding Foucault's conceptualization of liberal governmentality, Nguyen-vo explains how the liberal government polices intimate desires, affect, and subjectivities through the co-constituted production and mobilization of the empirically Real and the morally True. By rendering socioeconomic reality knowable and citizens autonomous in choosing and consuming, such scheme of liberal governance produces certain knowledge disciplines as positivist truths, including public health, criminology, and sociology, thus shaping a morally correct way of living disguised as a choice the liberal body makes out of social and economic freedom. While such liberal governance has its roots in Western modern imaging of individual free will, it has become the strategic tool of repression and discipline for other nation-states under the volatile neoliberal world (Nguyễn-võ 2008, xi-xxviii). Ong (2006) concretizes this system of neoliberal governmentality in two main schemes: technologies of subjection and those of subjectivity. On the one hand, technologies of subjection naturalize the Real through the spatial design that cultivates certain social values and thereby claims to citizenship. On the other hand, technologies of

subjectivitiy inculcates the Real as part of the knowledge system that induces the process of self-regulation for optimal competency (Ong 2006, 6-8). Following this logic of neoliberal governmentality, LGBT identity politics constitutes a knowledge system that shapes queer intimate desires and subjectivities through both spatial disciplining and self-regulation, through which their citizenship claims actualize the nation's developmentalist trajectory.

The overlapping deployment of knowledge and liberalism in policing genders took root in colonial powers' enforcement of gender binary, whose logics got recycled in the postcolonial state's project of cultivating the modern gendered self in service of development defined through the globalized economy. In particular, the colonial process of racializing Southeast Asian local populations relied on the epistemology of racialist Darwinism plaguing the West, which equated sexual dimorphism with signs of innate inferiority (Proschan 2002). This logic of racialized gendering found itself in the hands of the post-colonial state, as the new citizens became the liberal subject choosing to embody true knowledge about genders and sexualities. Simultaneously, the post-colonial subject was gendered through the same binary of civility – barbarism used by colonial powers in service of modernization and developmental economy. Hegarty (2022), for example, elucidated how the production of medicalization as positivist truths normalized the technology of and for "natural gender", such as medical transsexuality, for the newly fashioned modern subject of the newly independent Indonesian nation-state. In tandem with the emergence of secular disciplines such as psychiatry, medicine, and bureaucracy, the status of innate gender authenticated through colonial dichotomies of mind – body,

male – female, and cisgender – transgender, worked to normalize the heteronormative nuclear family in the pit of New Order development (Hegarty 2022).

Vietnam is no exception to this pattern. Pettus (2003) tracked the construction of modern femininity in post-colonial, post-revolutionary Vietnam, which not only implicated women in domesticity and reproductive sexuality, but also in technology, science, and rationality in service of their heteronormative nuclear family and the metaphorical nation-family. In this way, the New Vietnamese woman embodied both national modernization and moral redemption through their self-reinvention as the tech-savvy, rational mother or wife. In the same period, Tran (2014) explicated how the European discourse of medical sexology and the post-colonial state's Cultured Family and Social Evils campaigns interwove to render non-normative genders and sexualities legible only through the linear alignment of biological sex, appearances, and reproductive capability. The "wrong body" conception of transgender, legitimized through the scientism of sexology, turned to regulate intimate desires, affect, and bodily experiences of those derailing from sex – gender – sexuality normative grid (Tran 2014). The force of liberal governmentality thus undergirded the policing of gender (non)normativities in these post-colonial contexts, as the new citizen is interpellated in the empirically Real innate gender and the morally True reproductive pulse of the developmental economy as well as the modern society.

My research extends this framework of self-governmentality into the LGBT media production, highlighting how LGBT identifications work as a knowledge system articulated through both the spatial design of the media company and the queer subjects'

self-regulation. In this realm, the intimate affect of self-certainty and the mobility of the queer subjects across subnational spaces bespeak the place of LGBT identity politics within the scheme of national developmentalism.

Feeling Certain: Essentialized LGBT Identity in TV Shows

The disciplining of LGBT identity categories in the TV show depends on its ability to police the affect of self-certainty among both the LGBT participants and the production team. Via the practices of scripting and teleprompting, the show inculcates within their participants the capability to feel certain about a transhistorically and scientifically true LGBT identity. At the same time, the interpersonal dynamics behind the stage among the team members and the queer participants also foregrounds the narrative of heterosexuality and queerness as essentially, innately dichotomous. Yet these disciplining efforts are also constantly destabilized by the blurred boundaries of gender and sexuality performances, the transgression of which manifests both on and off screen.

On the one hand, the practices of scripting and teleprompting before and during the filming processes of "A Bright LGBT Life" naturalize and enforce a form of knowing in alignment with the essentialist narrative of LGBT identifications. First of all, the identification of the participant's LGBT categorical labels is designed to kickstart the conversation between the hosts and the interviewed subjects in the filming studio. Throughout the four filming sessions, I consistently encountered the team members and the hosts asking the same question about a 'Real' LGBT identity of the participants in the first place.

"Since when do you know (*biết*) exactly who you are?"

"How do you know (*biết*) you are gay?"

"How do you know (*biết*) you are not gay and actually trans?"

"How could you determine (*xác định*) that you wanted to be a woman?"

These examples illustrate the focus of the questions on a positivist form of knowing one's queer identities. While repeating verbs like "know" (*biết*) and "determine" (*xác định*), the team reinforces the overarching belief in a true LGBT self that could only be found through trial and error, differentiating these folks from heterosexual people. The word "know" (*biết*) indicates that the LGBT individual has the ability to confirm such true identity, while the word "determine" (*xác định*) connotes a capacity for a conscious decision as well as a sense of finality of a certain answer.

Moreover, these questions are woven into a storyline, always already imagined as linear and actively bent to the normative timeline of discovering a true LGBT identity, coming out, struggling through violence, and overcoming hardship for a bright future. Coming out occupies an irreplaceable part of the standardized questionnaire for all participants, imprinted as indispensable, natural, and universal to the queer experiences. One team member revealed to me during the first filming session that "coming out" must always be prioritized in the script of the show before other items such as the career development, love life, or current situations of the queer participants. While the two members behind the stage steers the conversations between the hosts and the participant on set in favor of such temporal orderliness, they reject the possibilities of impossible identities or the unknowability of queerness itself being lived and felt constantly in the

body. In other words, the period of "confused about one's identity" must not be eternal but resolved for a form of knowing that affords self-certainty. In their version of lifeworlds, identity crisis must be surmounted eventually for a true LGBT self to be excavated, acknowledged, and narrated. On the filming site, the two team members in the backstage studio often instruct or 'teleprompt' the hosts to follow the temporal order of "knowing" and "coming out" prior to conversing about other topics.

> "Don't ask about coming out yet. You must first tell them to ask about discovering gay identity. If he did not determine that he was gay in the first place, how could he come out?"

This is an instruction of a team member sitting in the behind-the-stage production studio for the hosts who were interviewing a young gay man on set. The member insisted on reorganizing the questions for the hosts so that the gay identity be known before whatever looks like a coming out moment could take place. Similar moments repeated when Trà, a trans woman, came to the show, and the team members instructed the hosts to ask about their journey of searching for a true gender identity.

> "Did you know from a young age that you were trans?"

> "No. When I was young, I only knew that I liked boys, not girls. I even thought I was gay for a while, because that's all I found on the Internet."

At this moment, a team member was about to instruct the host to inquire into the process of coming out when another member intervened: "You must ask how they knew they were not gay first. Then ask them how they knew they were trans instead of gay. Only then can you ask about coming out."

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These instructions work to discipline the way queer subjects live, feel, and think about selfhood by ascribing the LGBT identifications and the act of coming out the meaning of "knowing." In this context, "gay" and "trans" are treated as neat identities already packaged into boxes to be swapped at will of the queer body. Particularly, these questions and the timelines they design signify an affect of feeling certain, attainable through constructed LGBT identifications ironing out the looping, recursive, and chaotic ways one embodies queer desires and subjectivities. The impossible stability of such identitarian essence thus requires constant disciplining over self-narration and constraints over self-reimagination. The act of coming out is also engendered to mark absolute self-certainty rather than part of ongoing, recursive, and ambiguous processes of living queerly. As Manalansan (2003) reminds us, coming out is a phenomenological production of gay identity rooted in American valorization of individualistic separation from familial bonds as well as singularization of verbal proclamations as ideal liberation of a secret true self. Instead, Manalansan (2003) uses the concept of "feeling out" to recuperate the productivity of silence in forging dignified ties between Filipino gay men and their families, while privileging their incomprehensible subjectivity felt in the body over the Western model of agential selfhood. In the case of the LGBT TV show in Vietnam, the excessive emphasis on the singular moment of coming also reproduces the knowledge about a true identity in hiding yet conditioning such promise of liberation on the capacity of the queer body to feel certain about their subjectivity. Hence the disciplining of coming out as a compulsory LGBT narrative not only regenerates the Western gay narratives of liberation but also renders invisible the lived experiences of confusion,

crisis, and uncertainty in queer bodies. The queer body, thus, bears the burden of regulating their own affective realities to match the prescribed knowledge about the Real LGBT selfhood.

The affect of essentialist LGBT identifications is dialectically consolidated by the production of heterosexuality as a natural proclivity. Evidently in the filming set, the production team locates their LGBT participants through difference from themselves. While on set, the majority of team members refers to these queer folks as "them" (*các bạn ấy)* delineating their sense of self as distinct from these participants. The interpersonal relationships among the team members also illustrate a similar form of knowing as discussed above – knowing oneself to be innately heterosexual. This brings us back to the heterosexual gaze examined in Chapter 1, illuminating more clearly the intertwining of heteronormativity behind the scenes and the production of the respectable queer on stage. The production of stable LGBT identities and the preservation of the heterosexual order become the mutually reinforcing dynamics that constrains queer life from breaking out of knowability and thereby governability.

Indeed, the seemingly trivial interactions among the team members of "A Bright LGBT Life" disclose the structure of governing self-knowledge that essentializes not only queerness but also heterosexuality. On the first day at CCC, I was introduced to Diệp, a core member of the production team, who would help me understand and participate in the working processes. Diệp is a 29-year-old woman who has been working at CCC for 3 years mostly in the realm of TV show production and TikTok livestreaming. When Hằng took me to the filming studio to meet Diệp, she said that Diệp had just asked her for a

vacation break so that Diệp could go to Thailand and "search for her true gender" (*xác định lại giới tính*). Beside emplacing 'Thailand' in the regional queer imaginaries, Hằng also evoked Diệp's strong rejection of this idea: "No, I am not *bê-đê. I am just an average straight (thẳng bình thường). I was just kidding when I said I must find my true self."* The term *bê-đê* refers to those transgressing normative gender and sexual norms, used widely in contemporary Vietnamese cultural and social scenes. While rooted in French colonial pejorative use for young gay Vietnamese men (Tran 2014), the term has been reclaimed recently by queer folks as a playful engagement with the abject of being queer or non-normative. Emerging in this context, the term worked to parody the trope of a quest for one's true LGBT identity, one repetitively performed on the show, with a view to reinscribing sexuality as the marker of innate difference perched upon the heterosexual – homosexual dichotomy. At that time, the filming studio was also occupied by two other team members, who laughed out loud at Diệp's rejection and continued to tease her about the possibility of being bê-đê.

The rejection of Diệp, who works directly with and presumably for LGBT people, toward the possibility of a *bê-đê* selfhood, in this sense, resonates with the laughter among team members at the joke. The affect of feeling certain, reserved in this case to stabilize heterosexuality as an innate identity, evokes humor from the idea of such certainty being subverted. On this note, the scholarship on the representation of trans/queer bodies in comedy has illuminated how the genre of comedy distances the gender and sexual transgressive subject as the Other, the objects of ridicule, while reinstating cis- and hetero-normativity (Phillips 2006; Douglas 2010; Lieberfeld and

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Sanders 1998). The comedic nature of this genre is derived from ridicule, as the audience is guided and expected to laugh at the characters' failures to perform both femininity and masculinity (Serano 2016). At the same time, laughter at and not with the queer body plays the role of a cisnormative insurance, exorcising the threat of transgression and reasserting the authority of cisnormativity over transgressive genders and sexualities (Miller 2015). Aligned with this literature, the sense of humor elicited from conversations about flipping heterosexuality for a queer possibility behind the stage of the LGBT TV show keeps that idea securely a make-believe meant for the non-Real, dutifully consolidating heteronormative order by glossing over cracks that threaten to expose its performative, constructed nature. Moments like this ask the members to regulate their affective experiences in tune with such heteronormative order so that they are able to joke at the possibility of 'turning queer,' something so absurd it is worth a good laugh.

The affect of feeling certain is thus policed on both ends: the sense of a true LGBT self and the sense of a stable heterosexual self. As the production team integrates a neat system of LGBT categories into the narratives of queer participants, linearized to implicate a true self within the mandatory moment of coming out, they turn the individualistic liberal subject into the normative queer, privileging the heteronormative script over the lived realities of queer self-inventions and complications. Thereby, the process reinscribes the binaries of heterosexuality – homosexuality, mind – body, authenticity – falsity, those replicating not only the colonial logics of nature – culture that racializes civilization but also the heteronormativity as the framework of interpellating and domesticating queer threats. As everyone on set is hailed to micro-manage their

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feeling of self-certainty – in service of either a LGBT or heterosexual essence – they

participate in the economy of self-engineering and self-management aimed at turning

gender and sexual non-normativities into benign, homonormative counterparts. However,

the fleeting moment of the 'queer threat' in the backstage studio also signifies the

instability and performativity of heteronormative genders and sexualities, threatening to

wreak havoc at the linearized, carefully crafted narratives of LGBT and heterosexual

identities as essentially dichotomous.

Feeling Modern: LGBT Representations and Reproduction of Hierarchies

The knowledge system of essential LGBT identities in "A Bright LGBT Life," mapped

onto the terrain of urban versus rural spaces disciplines the queer subjects to feel modern

or backward. This regime of self-governmentality, employed through the logic of

positivist knowledge and self-engineering, not only enforces LGBT identifications but

also naturalizes the developmental temporality scaffolding the Vietnamese nation. In this

section, I shall draw on Halberstam's concept of metronormativity (2005), as the charting

of queer liberation onto the migration from rural to urban centers. I will demonstrate that

the increasing synonymity between LGBT identifications and modern subjecthood serves

to rationalize the scheme of national developmentalism.

First, the knowledge system underpinning the organization and signification of

CCC spaces ascribes to LGBT identities the meanings of 'progress' and 'modernity'.

From a bird's eye view, the office complex of this company is situated amidst the

cacophony of Ho Chi Minh city, a busy, entrepreneurial, and globalized metropolis. The

working space of the production team is excessively decorated with Pride flags, Pride banners, and other LGBT merchandise. The whole team repeated to me that their working environment is youthful *(trẻ trung),* liberal (*tự do*), and dislodged from the traditional styles of corporate cultures. They provided a range of examples: employees are allowed to wear whatever they want, not limited to the conventional formal attire; employees can move around in the office at will with a view to enhancing efficiency of teamwork; employees can talk and eat during work hours; etc. The easily recognized symbols of Pride thus play the role of the proxy for the liberal, multicultural, and globalized image of CCC.

Figure 4. The Working Space at CCC. Photo by the author.

More concretely, during our first meeting, Hằng discussed with me how "A Bright LGBT Life" both creates an impact for and is under the impact of LGBT activism, revealing their positioning squarely within the crux of national and social progress.

> "7 years ago, when I first started this program, that was the first time a LGBT person could come on national TV to talk about themselves. It was really needed at the time because LGBT people felt like they did not have anywhere else, anyone else to share their story or to seek sympathy. We got a lot of volunteers for the show, and recruiting LGBT participants was much easier. Now LGBT people have been accepted so widely, and the society has become more progressive; even the government is recognizing then! This community no longer feels the need to come to our show. They have other resources for sharing, sympathizing, and connecting with one another. We have more difficulty recruiting LGBT participants now. We would have to directly reach out to LGBT people and convince them to join the show."

Hằng shared with me about the changes in the recruitment process of the show, contextualized in what she perceived as the atmosphere of rising progressiveness in the Vietnamese nation and society, indicated in the general statement of "wide acceptance." Perceiving themselves as part and parcel of national and transnational progress, the team locates the material and discursive embrace of LGBT identifications within a linearized universal march away from tradition and toward modernity. Critical scholarship on LGBT rights activism and discourse has conceptualized Pride mainstreaming as a new metric of modernity, or even a form of white neo-imperialism, seizing the Third World

queer body in a foreign logic of oppression and thus a need for Western-style liberation (Massad 2002). The emergence of LGBT identity politics in Vietnam exemplifies an exceptional case. Married to the state agendas, LGBT rights has emerged as a technical solution toward Vietnam's global recognition and incorporation and thereby access to international aid and investment (Newton 2016; Tsang 2022). In that process, the movement is "dating" the state in weaponizing gay rights for recognition of progress, civility, and development, whilst turning a blind eye to other causes of justice (Franke 2012; Tsang 2022). When articulated in the realm of the media production space of CCC, the signification of LGBT iconography as modernity combines with the cultivation of the urban city as the growth hub of the developmental nation. In Ong's words, the media production space of CCC is marked by the government-as-ecology scheme of governance which carves these "special spaces" to the strategic goal of attracting resources and regulating social values compatible with the developmental future (Ong 2006, 7-8). In other words, LGBT identifications simultaneously produce the modern citizen-subject whose migration and urban dwelling facilitate and naturalize the developmentalist schemes of the nation.

In this process, the mapping of LGBT identities onto the urban spaces constructs the rural Other whose existence is contrasted against the spatial organization and practices of CCC itself. Hà, a gay participant who migrated from Sóc Trăng to Hồ Chí Minh city for work, played the rural Other when I was at the filming set that day. Like other sessions, I was in the backstage studio with two team members and Diệu when Hà answered the host's question of how he 'knew' he was gay.

"I did not know anything at that time. I knew I liked boys, so I joined gay groups on those old-fashioned websites to hook up with someone. I finally talked to this one guy, and we arranged to meet. When I met him there, he looked terribly ugly, so different from the photos he had on his web profile. We were obviously there for sex, but I did not want to do it with him. I told him so, but he insisted that I gave him a blowjob. I was afraid that he would hurt me somehow though, and I tried to just get it done. That was my first experience with the gay community"

Ha was telling this story of nonconsensual sexual experiences when one team member turned to us with this hurtful comment: "*Nhà quê đó* (rural or uncultured)! He grew up in a small town, so he could not know how to protect himself from these things or these people on the Internet." Other members simply nodded at this comment, while Ha continued to recount his memories of sexual harassment. The word *nhà quê* could be translated literally as "a person from their own hometown," while its common use in quotidian conversations has come to signify rural roots, or the uncultured nature of a person, defined in contrast to fashionable, cultured, civilized urban dwellers (*văn minh* or *hiện đại)*. The term *nhà quê* thrown out easily, almost nonchalantly, demarcates the boundaries between civility and barbarism, mapped upon the urban – rural binary. In this context, urban civility is implicitly articulated through concepts of digital literacy, knowledge, and cleverness in protecting one's own benefits (or *khôn*), while a rural body is understood through ignorance, outdatedness, and naivety (*dại*). Aihwa Ong (2006) would describe this regulatory instance as a "technology of subjection," specifically a spatializing practice that seeks to fortify the urban space as the epitome of civility and

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growth, distinguished from the stuck-in-past ruralscape. Such governmentality-as-ecology strategy (Ong 2006, 8) charts rationality, knowledge, and by extension modernity onto the urbanized body, enclosing it in a logic of progressive development, forward-facing futurity, and thus sustainable life. Hence Hà was rendered the rural Other whose gay identification alone did not afford the modern subjecthood stylized specifically for the urban bodies.

In this way, migration from the rural spaces to Hồ Chí Minh city engenders the blooming of the queer bodies into both LGBT identities and modern subjecthood. The visibility of the queer bodies in the urban hub comes to signify both queer liberation and national modernization. The context of Vietnam then concurs with Halberstam's theorization of metronormativity (2005), which critiques LGBT identity politics as governing queer liberation as a function of migrating from rural to urban spaces. Trà, a trans woman who is working as a makeup artist and stylist in Hồ Chí Minh city, narrated their self-transformation into LGBT identifications on the grounds of their migration to the big city. I was able to join one team member when she conducted a preliminary interview with Trà before their turn to be filmed on set. This interview took place in person in the dressing room behind the stage, and Trà was in fact the stylist and assistant of one of the hosts that day. When the team member asked about Trà's journey of discovering their "true identity," Trà brought up the distinction between the urban transgender women and Lô Tô performers in their hometown.

"How do you know you are transgender?"

"When I was younger, I did not know I was transgender. I only knew the Lô Tô aunties at home (*các cô Lô Tô dưới quê*) who would dress up as women and wear beautiful makeup. I only knew I was the same. Only when I grew up and moved to the city did I learn of transgender as a thing. I have always been into fashion and makeup, so I became a stylist and makeup artist for other transwomen. I slowly thought of myself as similar to them."

Lô Tô shows, a live performance stage developing from the folk cultures specific to the Southwest of Vietnam. It is believed to have emerged in the 1980s as a replication of the bingo (lotto) game and been localized with the entwining of Vietnamese folk music, pre-war bolero (*nhạc vàng*), revolutionary music (*nhạc cách mạng*), and mainstream pop music[4]. Spatially, Lô Tô has shifted from a moving circus who camped itself in local fairs, to a stationed show that is systematically produced, promoted, and performed in major cities in the South of Vietnam. Even though the term transgender has slippery meanings in the Vietnamese context, Lô Tô performers are now widely perceived as transwomen especially of lower-class, who resort to this performing career either as a refuge for non-normative gender expressions or as a necessity of livelihood (Nguyen et al. 2020).

Juxtaposing the Lô Tô aunties with urban transgender women in fashion and beauty industries, Trà mapped their transition from unintelligble queerness to concrete

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[4] Danh Tuan Minh. "Chơi lô tô có gì mà nên trải nghiệm ít nhất một lần trong đời?" *Thanh Nien*, February 4, 2022, sec. Nhật ký Tết Việt. https://thanhnien.vn/choi-lo-to-co-gi-ma-nen-trai-nghiem-it-nhat-mot-lan-trong-doi-1851426817.htm. Accessed May 24, 2023.

LGBT identities, from rural to urban, from falsity to authenticity, and, by extension, from backwardness to civility. With the mention of Lô Tô and *"quê"* (hometown or rurality), Trà evoked a sense of nostalgia intermingled with the process of urbanization that pulls rural populations to relocate in metropolitan or industrial cities. Yet by suggesting that they came to realize their true LGBT identity (in this case, transgender woman) only through the intervention of the urban space and its inhabitants, Tra reaffirmed the project of regulating their selfhood in alignment with both essential LGBT identifications and modern subjecthood. Trà's legitimate LGBT identities are thus authenticated through urban bodily dwelling.

On this note, Trà's debut in the beauty work as a stylist and a make-up artist in this urban space turns the visibility of their transfemininity into the basis of modern selfhood. Many scholars have attempted to theorize how the transition of gender-crossing spirit mediums from different places of Southeast Asia into beauty work reveals and takes advantages of the drive toward modern subjecthood in these post-colonial, globalizing states (Jackson 2012; Keeler 2016; Hegarty 2022). Similar to the Burmese transwomen remaking themselves in the beauty industry to help the local populations negotiate the "modern" styles of femininity (Keeler 2016), Trà articulated a new binary between their fashionable, middle-class gender-transformation and the "outmoded", "old-fashioned" mode of cross-dressing. Trà's ability to seize technologies of self-transformation for legitimate transfeminity reflects what Hegarty (2022) demonstrates as the link between bodily cultivation and modern selfhood in the post-colonial society, which imbues in their transgressive genders the meanings of modern self-engineering. In short, the technologies

of mobility and bodily transformation turn the queer bodies into the modern citizen-subject in the urban hub of national development.

I also contend that the queer bodies' claim to social recognition and public legitimacy in the urban space falls not only on the technologies of bodily transformation but simultaneously on the embodiment of LGBT identities. The transfeminine self-cultivation and LGBT identifications increasingly become intertwined in the urban center, co-constituting the progressive temporality of both queer emancipation and national development. As Stanley (2021) puts it, "[w]hile mainstream LGBT politics clamors for dominant power through a reproduction of the teleological narrative of progress, it also reproduces the idea that anti-trans/queer violence is an aberration of democracy belonging only to a shadowed past, and increasingly anachronistic." If the regime of LGBT visibility politics foregrounds a progressive timeline of queer liberation, the public view of the transfeminine bodies in the urban space also emplaces the queer bodies in the developmentalist trajectory. In other words, the trans woman regulates their own affect and subjectivities in tune with essentialist LGBT identities in performance of self-liberation and modernization of the national collective. Meanwhile, the Lô Tô aunties play the "backward queers" (Liu 2020), who are bound to feel behind and outside of the timescape of development. Such intimate affect, therefore, charts the local articulations of LGBT identities onto both the temporality of LGBT liberal politics and the spatiality of urban developmentalism.

Starting with the media production of LGBT identities as essentialist, this chapter has demonstrated how the form of self-knowledge embedded in LGBT identifications in

"A Bright LGBT Life" is mapped onto the spatial organization and signification of the urban space in Vietnam. The queer subjects must fashion themselves into the identity-based, modern citizen whose urban dwelling visibly justifies the scheme of national developmentalism through what is perceived as queer liberation.

CHAPTER 3

SỖ SÀNG: PRODUCTION OF THE GOOD QUEER

When Hà was retelling the agonizing experiences of struggling with sexually transmitted

diseases, the team members in the behind-the-stage studio commented on how Hà was

too blunt about this. I asked the member sitting next to me:

"Can we still keep this part in the broadcast version?"

"No, we would have to cut out parts that are too *sỗ sàng* (insolent or rude) when

we edit the raw footage."

"What kinds of things have to be cut out?"

"Stuff that is too violent or too coarse (*thô tục*). We edit them out smoothly so that

the broadcast show still feels seamless.... There was one time when a participant

told their true story (*câu chuyện thật*) of being gang-raped. It left the whole

production team in complete silience and in tears. No one knew how to continue

with filming. We had to cut that out because it was too painful to watch."

The words *sỗ sàng* and *thô tục* all point to an attack toward the sensory

experiences of watching a TV show. They both concern the disapproving reaction on the

end of the audience toward a story told too frankly, brutalities revealed too honestly, the

abject exposed too much in plain sight. On set that day, Hà was using very blunt,

straightforward languages to talk about experiences so frightening such as a swelling

penis, a bleeding asshole, rash on skin. What does Hà's story have in common with the

story of a queer person being gang-raped? Why were they both banished out of the

narratives the TV show allowed to be broadcast, even when the team themselves acknowledged that the stories reflected "true" (*thật)* histories?

In this paper, I attempt to elucidate the production of the respectable queer who is percevied as morally good within the new politics of queer visibility in Vietnam. By focusing on the technologies of editing in "A Bright LGBT Life," I identify shame as the main affect which governs the relationship of queer life with intersectional experiences of sufferings. Instead of signifying a pre-liberation past of queer oppression, shame works in tandem with the structure of feelings in the local context to generate a mode of queer positivity hinged upon queer belonging to the moral collective of the nation. In other words, the good queer is not represented as free of sexual violence, pathology, or criminality, but above all shameful of their tragic fate. The socialist practices of self-criticism thus disciplines the queer bodies from articulating interlocking class, gender, and sexual inequalities and instead assimilates the queers into the heteronormative publics. However, this chapter also magnifies the moments of failures in the filming site when the queer bodies embodied shamelessness to radicalize a counterhegemonic form of care and disbelonging to the nation.

Traveling Pride: Affirmative LGBT Cultures in Vietnam

The ferocious wave of LGBT movements is swept up in a cry for affirmative visibility. Popularized by the U.S. gay and lesbian liberation movement in the 1980s, the so-called post-Stonewall gay pride has been at the forefront of LGBT rights activism, which seeks equality through attainments of heterosexual legal and political privileges. To diffuse the

effects of identity politics, the LGBT Pride cultures borrows the weight of positive representations, which desires to bring all LGBT bodies in line with "[l]iberation, legitimacy,dignity, acceptance, and assimilation..." (Halperin and Traub 2009). The local manifestation of LGBT movements in Vietnam may be collapsed into the same atmosphere of positive visibility, as scholars attribute the affirmative LGBT representations on the mainstream media and in the eyes of the state to LGBT rights activism (Pham 2022; Faludi 2016). Nevertheless, I argue that the contentious forces of individualizing and collectiving selfhood engender a much different modality of positive visibility for LBBT representations in Vietnam. In this context, shame, once understood as the antithesis of affirmative gay liberation in the West, colludes with the politics of LGBT positivity to govern queer affect and subjectivities in conformity with the national moral collective.

Against the assimilationist impulse of LGBT affirmative representations, Western queer scholars have interrogated the elimination and stigmatization of gay shame in this framework. From the premise that such Pride imperative vehemently villainizes "inveterate queer tendencies to disassociation and disidentification" (Halperin and Traub 2009), the scholarship is recuperating productivity of gay shame in "meaning, personal presence, politics, and performative and critical efficacy" (Sedgwick 1996). Particularly, Sedwick, in her republished essay on the nexus between shame and queer performativity, conceptualizes shame as a structuring and transformational force of queer identities and communities (2009). Not simply promulgating forms of queer sociality based on shared histories, habitual shame is part of the performative queerness whose uneven, contingent,

and amorphous repetitions render legible multiple "social metamorphic possibilities" (Sedgwick 2009). Thereby, Sedgwick (2009) calls for a recuperation of gay shame in breaking LGBT identity politics out of its essentialist quagmire. Building up on Sedgwick's theorization, Crimp (2009) proposes an ethical model of deploying gay shame to counter the "homogenizing, normalizing, and desexualizing of gay life" endemic of post-liberation gay and lesbian politics. For this scholarship, gay shame constitutes an anti-assimilationist mode of queer politics that critiques the homonormativity of Pride cultures while (re)imagining alternative forms of queer relationalities and subjectivities.

However, the question of how such LGBT cultures travels to non-Western contexts necessitates the reevaluation of shame versus pride as the affective binary that motivates, reframes, and unravels the local scene of queerness. First of all, the case of Vietnam does unfold in an affirmative LGBT politics of affirmative Pham (2022), for example, has dissected different tactical frameworks utilized by LGBT activists for policy advocacy and consciousness raising, including the diffusion of "positive images" of the LGBT community on the mainstream media with the goal of cultivating "empathy among equals" between the public and LGBT people. This aspiration to positivize LGBT representations in the public sphere is enacted through four counterframes of constructing LGBT people as normal, desexualized, identity-based, rights-bearing citizens (Faludi, 2016). These scholars waste no time in capturing the terrain of LGBT activism in Vietnam through the lens of identity politics borrowed from the globalized LGBT movement rooted in U.S. gay liberation demands for affirmative visibility and politico-

legal recognition. In a way, this scholarship itself is steeped up in Pride discursive and material realities, incapable of the self-reflexive analysis that questions, critiques, or transgresses such affect of "out and proud."

This chapter shall decenter this Western logic in grasping the local scene of queerness and pay attention to the entrenched socialist structures of feeling that intervenes into how the respectable queer is constructed in Vietnamese mainstream media. The out-and-proud liberal queer is thus displaced for the nonliberal queer who feels both self-attained pride and collective shame in the same body. I contend that shame becomes an extending arm of the technologies of self-governmentality, not eliminated but further imposed by the localized version of affirmative LGBT politics. The shameful queer, also the respectable queer, is incorporated in the national moral collective through an assimilationist mode of belonging that glosses over the intersectional structures of social inequalities. On that note, shamelessness is not Pride with a capital P, but a postsocialist affect critical of such interlocking injustice and productive of alternative queer subjectivities and sociality.

Self-Critical: Disciplining the Respectable Queer

The affect of self-criticism dubs the project of self-governance in the production of LGBT representations to compel the queer subjects to feel both shame and belonging to the national moral collective. Therefore, the verdict of self-criticism underlines the logic of respectability politics, which masks the lived experiences of intersecting class, gender, and sexual inequalities with the imperative for the queer self to be at guilt. In the

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production of "A Bright LGBT Life," the technologies of editing serve to accentuate this affect of shame and cultivate the sympathetic public around the representations of the moral queer.

The technologies of editing have allowed the production team of the show to isolate the affect of shame from its holistic context of interlocking inequalities and queer subjectivities. In order to adapt to the media environment of 'fast content' dominated by short, visual-based videos, the production team of "A Bright LGBT Life" is utilizing different social media platforms, including YouTube Shorts, Facebook Reels, and TikTok, to create and promote shorter clips from the long format of the show. These shorter clips work as the 'highlight content' which spotlights a certain moment, participant, or story that has been cut out from its original context but aims to captivate the audiences in a time lapse as quick as one minute. The decontextualized highlight content then evokes the emotional responses from the audiences who consume these media without understanding the full story told by the queer participants. Such short content thus reflects the decisions of the production team regarding which types of narratives, sentiment, or expressions would be most appealing to the mostly young users of these social media platforms. In short, by making use of the technologies of editing for these social media content, the production team is cultivating a sympathetic public for the decontextualized narratives of queer shame shaped by their heterosexual gaze.

In the filming site, the affect of shame performs the queer selfhood which self-criticizes to reckon with the conditions of national belonging, which then works to reproduce the intersectional structures of inequalities in the society. The case of Bống, a

gay man who is also a rising singer in Vietnam, fleshed out the process. During Bống's filming session, he told the devastating story of his lover's death:

> "My lover at that time was fighting cancer, while I was starting my career as a singer. We were not supported by our families, so I had to take on a lot of responsibilities for making a living for us two. I was busy making money, while he struggled on the hospital bed. When he died, I blamed myself a lot for his death. I told myself that it was me who neglected him in his last moments and caused him heartbreaks. I still blame myself until today."

In the backstage studio, the team members quietly sympathized with him: "No doubt he blamed himself." They quietly nodded their heads and frowned in collective grief. The self-critical affect reverberating through the filming set in that moment blends into the project of self-regulation. The policing of what Larson (2013) called "post-socialist critical subjectivity" is embedded in a state project of transforming civil antagonism with communist faltered promises into hopes for liberal civility and development. In Bống's story, the pursuit of the capitalist "good life," premised on wealth accumulation and economic success, fell short in guaranteeing interpersonal and collective care, which revealed the extant inequalities in the Vietnamese setting. Shame, expressed by Bống, enacts the buffer that Larson (2013) considered instrumental to the processes of repackaging the post-socialist affective negativity into positive hopes and in turn producing the desires for developmentalist growth. The shameful queer subject thus stands at the nexus of different forces of self-governmentality and late socialist demands for collective duty at the expense of the self. The dialectic of criticism and self-criticism

(*phê bình/tự phê bình*), forming common practices in many Vietnamese institutions, lends moral authority to the neoliberalist imperative of self-governance in the Vietnamese society (MacLean 2012). The collision of post-socialist self-governance and ethics offers the techno-solutions to the problem of accountability and reconsolidate the Communist Party's legitimacy. Bống's performance of self-regulation in the filming site thus glazes over the question of class inequality, articulated in their lived experiences as a financially unstable gay man, displacing the provision and distribution duties of the state onto the socialist self. Hence Bống's queer narratives render queer life intelligible to the mainstream audience on grounds of its collusion with the structure of class hierarchy in the nation.

The socialist practices of self-criticism is then amplified by the technological facet to grant the respectable queer who performs shame with a limited mode of belonging to the nation. The technologies of editing enable the disciplining of the respectable queer by producing the sympathetic audiences for queer media from the basis of shame as a collective moral affect. In the case of Bống, the production team has cut apart a short clip when he was crying and recounting his lover's death and blaming himself. This reel has been made into a special short highlighted on its own on various social media platforms – YouTube short, Instagram reel, and Tiktok, attracting a quick, immmediate audience who is scrolling past tons of videos in a split second. The team has also matched this highlight cut with the background music of "The Unspoken Farewell" (*Lời tạm biệt chưa nói*), a Vietnamese pop ballad about heartbroken love. On the official TikTok channel of "A Bright LGBT Life," this clip is accompanied by the following

caption: "Teary and remorseful story of the male singer," and has over 1000 likes so far. The "remorseful" tone of the clip is echoed by the comments below it expressing empathy, which reflects the form of belonging the shameful queer could negotiate for within the publics. In this way, the affect of self-criticism is inflamed trough the post-filming technologies of editing in service of digitalized "quick content," including the use of special effects, music soundtrack, additional captions, and "cropping" were utilized by the production team to emplace the audience into communal sympathy. This assemblage of technologies emplaces the queer self in what Davies considers "webs of shame," or the affective matrix that conditions one's participation in public life upon one's performance of collective shame for and alongside their neighbors, friends, and colleagues (2015, 33). The post-filming technologies enact this performative process in the virtual realm, incorporating the queer subject into the socialist collective.

Bống's performance of self-criticism resonates with one of the goals of the show that Hằng shared with me in our interview, which implicates both the queer subjects and the audiences in a structure of hierarchical sympathy. Hằng explained about the "media factor," which stands for the affective alignment between the speaking queer body and the normative public:

> "When the editors produce the show, they have their own way of building the stories in order to add the media factor (*yếu tố truyền hình*). A little set-up aims to highlight the real stories told by the participants. For example, we can ask the participants to wear certain clothes, eat certain food, or do certain activities that carry nostalgic meanings to them in hope of intensifying their emotions when

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retelling their stories. In that way, the show can create a stronger effect (*hiệu ứng*) of eliciting emotional responses from the mainstream audience,"

This media factor also manifests itself in the process of recruiting participants for the show. One team member explained to me how tragic narratives formed a pillar criterion in recruiting and selecting queer participants for the show:

"There are two criteria in selecting which participants should be invited. The first one is that their story must be special (*đặc biệt)*. For example, a story of family acceptance and peaceful coming-out moments is unworthy of telling (*không có gì để kể*). The second is that the story must be novel and strange (*mới lạ)*. For example, everyone could tell the same story of growing up, wanting to play with dolls instead of cars, and realizing that they are transgender. That story is too boring."

As this member stated, a queer story worth telling is a tragic story. The "media factor" thus exploits the tragic stories if queer participants to intensify the emotive effects of the show. The cultivation of such empathetic audiences serves to interpellate queer life into the existing heteronormative collective by converting the queer self into palatable, respectable subjects. By having the queer subjects perform the normativity ingrained in quotidian activities and emotions, the production team aimed to evoke sympathy from the publics who, just like the team itself, "discovered that LGBT people are also humans." In Stanley's words, sympathy is conditioned upon the bodily and affective performances of the "category of the human" in opposition of the "ontopolitical category of nothingness," or the negativity of the recognized subjects, that the queer subjects have been made to

occupy (Stanley 2021, 33-34). In this way, LGBT TV shows become the outlet for straight panic, seeking to pacify the anxiety of the heterosexual audiences, who find their moral and social values challenged by the politics of sexual identity (Becker 2006). However, the efforts in sanitizing queer life without challenging the core structure of heteronormativity eventually embolden the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Thereby, the affective labor required of Bống in the show produces a sympathetic audience who can safely set aside their participation in the heteronormative order in exchange of a moral sentiment promising them a collective identity.

Sympathy, thereby, articulates the political and socially validated subject whose superiority emanates from the capacity to privilege their affective reality over that of the queer Other, while simultaneously obscuring differences for the sake of universalizing the former's subjectivity. The production team in the backstage of Bống's filming set illustrates a microcosm of such effects, as their sympathetic reactions to Bống's story behind the scenes anchors a superior subject who can overglaze the queer subjective realities with their own emotions despite the Othering process taking place between them. The power dynamics between the audiences who see and the queer subjects who are seen as shameful reverberated with the mode of liberal sentimentalism rooted in Enlightenment ideology of universalism, which assumed the universal human needs based on Anglo-Saxon histories (Chen 2016). Chen (2016) has shown us how sympathy as a political affect could supersede the Oriental subjectivity for the affirmation of Western civilizations, establishing a cultural hierarchy between the civilized and the barbaric, also the sympathizer and the sympathized. This logic sneaks into the production

of a good queer in this media production space. The audience is assumed to be able to resonate with the self-critical grieving queer in spite of the difference demarcating them as the normative versus the nonnormative. This ability and entitlement to sympathize already privileges their subjectivity, whose affective reality is taken as the frame of meanings against which the queer body must measure to gain legibility and legitimacy. Reiterating the efficacy of the "straight camera" in eliding queer subjectivities, the technologies of editing, reinscribes the power hierarchy between the normative publics and the non-normative queers, also those who see and those who are seen in the dynamics of media production and spectatorship.

Shamelessness: Queer Radical Care

Coming back to the vignette at the beginning of the chapter, the technologies of editing work to exclude certain modes of queer affect and subjectivities, in this case the expression of shamelessness in the face of the abject (Kristeva 1982). As the respectable queer adopts the moral value of self-criticism in exchange of a limited form of belonging to the socialist nation, the embodiments of shamelessness carry the counterhegemonic power of queer politics. By zooming into the moments of failures when the queer subjects reject self-criticism in the filming site, I demonstrate how the queer affect of shamelessness destabilizes the heteronormative order underpinning the production and reception of shameful queer narratives and exposes the interlocking system of inequalities in the Vietnamese context.

On the set that day, Hà, the gay man who was also labeled "uncivilized, rural" (*nhà quê*) as we learnt in the previous chapter, embodied the shameless queer. Hà was narrating his messy experiences with sexual harassment and sexually transmitted diseases in blunt languages and a humorous tone when the team members behind the stage called out his "vulgar" (*sỗ sàng*). When he told the story of how he was forced into a nonconsensual sexual intercourse, something he referred to as a fun story (*một câu chuyện vui*), Hà exuded an air of honesty no one expected:

"I was trying to hunt down sugar daddy (*săn đại gia*) to make money from my beauty. At that time, I talked to this old man on Zalo and agreed to go out with him. He was twice my age, but I tolerated that. Money blurred my rationality (*Đồng tiền làm mờ mắt rồi*). Then he forced me to give him a blowjob, but I refused because he was so ugly. He kept pestering me, but I could not when I looked at his ugly face. He was so ugly I did not want to; if he was more handsome, I would have agreed. Eventually I had to do it because I was afraid he would beat me up."

When Hà gave this candid account of how he "hunted billionaires," the team members at the backstage were laughing at his nonchalant honesty. They also laughed at his lamentation of the man's ugliness. One member even said out loud: "He is so naive (*hồn nhiên*)!" However, the members also discussed the prospect of editing out parts when he used words deemed vulgar, such as "blowjob," "penis," and "asshole." They simultaneously talked about cutting parts when Hà cursed, while laughing at his candor. In the end, the parts about gruesome diseases (when Hà described his itchy, swelling

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penis) were cut out. Meanwhile, the parts about sexual harassment were kept in yet edited

with non-diegetic sound of suspenseful, horror music as well as special effects that

accentuated the sentiment of fears. On set that day, the team members kept being

surprised by Hà's blunt and nonchalant languages, which afforded a sense of humor that

they were emplaced in yet disapproved of. They called Hà "*táo bạo*" (audacious,

reckless) and "*lì lợm*" (dogged, unbending), exclamations that resonated with the

comment on his "naivety" (*hồn nhiên*) as they all acknowledged the absence of guilt,

sense of loss, or shame. The atmosphere of shameless humor Hà created for his stories

engaged multiple horrors – materialistic greed, violence, ugliness, and bodily

degeneration, which evoked both laughter and repulsion.

Shamelessness is marginalized in the narratives of queer subjecthood, which

attests to the construction of the respectable, self-critical queer under the arch of the

socialist nation. The technologies of editing allow this process of policing queer affect in

tune with the heteronormative gaze, as the team cut out the parts they deemed "vulgar."

As I explained in Chapter 1, editing is generally used to cut the raw footage shorter after

filming. Apart from smaller errors in terms of sound, speech, and images, the team also

cuts "sensitive" footage which may provoke unpleasant responses from the audiences.

The technological tools overshadow the queer exposure of multiple lived inequalities

with the collective moral order that demands self-criticism and self-regulation. Indeed,

Hà's candid narratives of class hierarchy and gender and sexual violence were buried

under the depiction of the monstrous queer Other, reinscribing the pathology of queerness

familiar in the horror genre (Phillip 2006). This explains why different editing

technologies were used to sanitize Hà's bluntness and enunciate the fearsome story of gay men as sexual predators.

At the same time, shamelessness works as a subversive affect in the set of "A Bright LGBT Life," one that ambivalently reckons with the inclusionist politics of LGBT representations for a mode of (dis)belonging to the collective. Hà's activation of such horrendous humor in the filming site beckons a return to Kristeva (1982) and her psychoanalysis of the abject, which unsettles the meanings of identity, system, and order through its flirtation with death and pains. The abject threatens to annihilate a seemingly stable sense of "I", hence eliciting fear that roots from the imperative to confront Otherness of the self – death, nonexistence, meaninglessness. The subversive powers of multilayered horrors that Hà narrated wrecked corruption at the moral purity that keeps the social body sane, debunking the meanings of LGBT celebration of a liberated queer. At the same time, Kristeva (1982) pinpointed laughter and oblivion as affect that seeks to sublimate the abject through displacement or aversion. The sense of oblivion attained not through repression but projection of the abject allows spaces for laughter that continues to diffuse, dilute, and transform its horror. Noted by MacDonald (2018), trans comedic engagement of the abject can enact a form of care and empowerment, as laughing at and with their own nonnormative body, desires, and life exposes genders and sexualities as performative, only possible through "a kind of Othering of the self" that generates a buffering self-reflexive distance between them and their estranged Othered body (57). Embrace of the abject in this way works to de-horrify its horror, resignifying nonnormative embodiment with a transformative sense of shared familiarity. As Hà's

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humor took off from a front of shamelessness, the form of care he performed for himself

necessitates a claim to postsocialist selfhood which allows queer disidentifications with

the monstrous Other and thus survival. Yet his humor enveloped the immediate audience

at the filming studio that day, who laughed despite their discombobulation at his empty

shame. Their laughter, on the other hand, should not be read out of habit as the ridicule of

trans subjects to reproduce hierarchies of normativity (Phillips 2006), but as the

concession of queer (dis)belonging in this context.

Put side by side, the filming sets of Bống and Hà illuminate how the conjoint

projects of individual self-governance and collectivist practices of self-criticism produce

the dichotomy of the self-critical "good queer" and the self-indulgent "bad queer." The

affect of shame works as an entry for queers to carve out belonging in the

heteronormative public, entwined with the ethos of collective duty. The same process of

self-regulation enacts a reckoning with structural failures to address intersectional

oppression and a reproduction of state power in perpetuating such inequalities. The

shameless queer, in a perverse sense, transgresses the snare of socialist structure of

feelings to reclaim a form of care and a space of disbelonging. Meanwhile, the shameless

body also enforces an exposure of interlocking injustice in the local setting glossed over

by the imperative of queer self-criticism.

CHAPTER 4

SƠ SÀI: PRODUCTION OF THE WHOLE QUEER FAMILY

Trà was about to tell the story of how she left home and moved to Sai Gon to live alone, when a member backstage rushed the host to return to the story of Trà's childhood. She instructed the host to inquire more about the difficulties and memories Trà had of those early years: "The part about her childhood memories was too simplistic and shallow (*sơ sài).* We must dig deeper (*khai thác sâu thêm*)." At this direction, the host glanced at the new set of questions on the monitor and asked Trà if she experienced a difficult childhood before leaving for the metropolis. In the backstage studio, I asked the member who gave this instruction why we must hear from Trà about her childhood again.

> "It is a must for all characters in the show. You know, stories about childhood...
> We must learn about the hardship they experienced when they were young,
> because that is the case for all of them. Only then can we understand why they
> decided to leave their house, quarrel with their parents, or go through transsexual
> surgeries."

The word *sơ sài*, in this case, reveals the show's privileging of the representation of childhood trauma, especially in comparison to the tragedies of sexual violence, STD, and queer villainy dissected in the previous chapter. An elaborate account of early-age traumas, coupled with discussions of gender and sexual crisis and familial relationships, constitutes an ideal queer story in the show.

This chapter shall discuss this insistence on the inclusion of familial childhood tragedies in LGBT representation in Vietnamese TV shows, contextualized in the

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production of past, present, and future in local cultures. By focusing on the technologies of rescripting and teleprompting in the production of "A Bright LGBT Life," I will offer insights into the process of reproducing the heteronormative family at the pith of LGBT identity and life, as well as begins to unpack the force of queer refusal which destabilizes, counters, and reimagines the heteronormative reproductive future imposed upon them. Thereby, I illustrate the discursive positioning of the blood family as inevitably natural, primary, and permanent to not only one's selfhood but also the national politico economic development. This chapter generates a significant intervention into the queer studies scholarship on "straight time" informed exclusively by (neo)liberalism. The Vietnamese context elucidates how heteronormative time is constructed in intertwining with neo-Confucian premium on blood and collectivity, thus manifests in an enclosed, circularized temporality of familial reproduction. Queer life is governed within what I call the circular heteronormative futurity whose past and future are both traced and imagined through the blood family itself.

Whilst pinpointing the overarching structure of reproducing the heteronormative family, I also illuminate the horizon of queer refusal located in the same media setting, sedimented in the affect of hopelessness, which rejects, unsettles, and rewrites the linearized heteronormative future into bent ways of being, living, and doing queers. I argue that the scholarship on queer resistance in Vietnam is nevertheless hinged upon the reproduction or reassertion of the blood family model. Instead, this chapter aspires to practice a radical analysis undergirded by refusal, disappointment, and vanity, rather than

on the promise of illusive happiness and wholeness always already mapped onto the temporality of heteronormative reproductivity and queer death.

The Heteronormative Family and Queer Resistance in Post-Đổi Mới Vietnam

The question of the New Family in the contexts of post-/late-socialist market economy has troubled the scholarship on genders and sexualities. The consensus seems to be that the transition of a socialist society into capitalist economic models entails the reinscription of traditional femininity and patriarchal values within the domestic sphere, severed from the public sphere which is now also the marketplace. In the case of Vietnam, Werner (2002) explicated how the 1986 policy of Đổi Mới (Renovation) set in motion a process of repositioning the household as part and parcel of Vietnam's political and economic integration into the global market economy. Once constructed as belonging to the block of "Great Unity" composed of the Party-state and the society, the post-Đổi Mới household was discursively predisposed to take charge of its own economic livelihood and labor allocation, thus turning the wheel of the reform processes. Above all, such macroeconomic restructuring seeped into the intimate space of families through the resubjectification of the populations into modern citizens. Under the developmentalist project, the nuclear family became the hallmark of not simply modern prosperity but also national traditions (Werner 2002; Pettus 2003). The New Family, thereby, constituted the nexus of revitalized traditionalism and new developmentalist rationalities, which rendered the space of the household pregnant with meanings of both national identity and modernity.

The literature continues to elaborate on how LGBT activism in Vietnam is underpinned by the strategic discourse of familial love and harmony, which is mobilized for political recognition but also social acceptance of LGBT rights. On the one hand, familial love formulates a crucial pillar of LGBT rights policy advocacy in Vietnam (Pham 2022). On the other hand, the activities of PFLAG, the Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays organization, have consistently been on the agenda of LGBT activist groups in the country. Tran Khac Tung, the director of ICS, one of the most prominent LGBT activist organizations in Vietnam, revealed that PFLAG was initiated in as early as 2011 and has played pivotal role in advocating for the decriminalization of same-sex marriage in the revised Marriage and Family Law released in 2014[5].

Given such resignification of the family, the emphasis on blood ties has reinforced heteronormativity in ways that pathologized gender and sexual non-normativities, yet scholars continue to locate spaces of resistance by queer youths in the midst of family politics (Horton and Rydstrom 2019; Mathisen 2022). This scholarship, while paying heed to multiple ways the queer subject negotiates the structure of the heteronormative family and critiquing the Western gay liberation imposition of the liberal mode of individualist gay selfhood, incorporates these strategies of resistance back into the logic of heteronormativity by taking as given the end goal of maintaining the biological family socially or emotionally. The queer subject can push back, but never to the extent of

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[5] *Tuoi Tre News*. "Vietnamese Parents Support LGBT Children's Quest for Equal Rights." September 15, 2016. https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/audio/20160915/vietnamese-parents-support-lgbt-children's-quest-for-equal-rights/33588.html. Accessed February 2, 2024.

dismantling the institution of heteronormative household. The queer subject can deviate, but never to the extent of rejecting the ethos of patrilineal, reproductive inheritance altogether.

This chapter strives to contest this assimilationist approach through a radical reading practice proposed by Edelman (2004). Edelman (2004) has formed a critique of the heteronormative "reproductive futurism" which is the production of time out of absolute privilege of procreative sexualities and social relations (2). The future can only be transmitted in form of the Child, while queerness signifies a drive to death of social order and human progress. Edelman gave a devastating account of liberal politics, arguing that political hope worked to evacuate the power of queer negativity and domesticate it within the realm of heteronormative temporality, with an illusionary promise of liberation and inclusivity. Instead, Edelman called for a politics of hopelessness, which rejects the hailing of linearized progressive history and exposes the inescapability of "unthinkable queer oppositionality" (4). Such hopelessness constitutes a disassociation from the desires for meaning and for "the good life" defined through normativity, which includes the denunciation of a futurism premised only on reproductive sexualities. To formulate a critique of the production of such reproductive futurism in Vietnamese LGBT TV shows, I illuminate how the queer subjects enacted a politics of refusal, rejecting the promise of happiness and harmony predicated upon interpellation into the heteronormative time-space of the reproductive family.

Circular Times: The Production of the Whole Family

The TV show sought to produce LGBT representations tethered to the model of a whole family. Such a family must be not only biological or blood-tied but also completed with harmony and love. The queer subject's narratives of childhood tragedies thus constitute an irreplaceable component of the show, as the relationship with the family is rendered indispensable to the process of self-development. Ironically, such narratives of growing-up trauma form a dialectical meaning to "family," given how it is positioned as both the original source and the ultimate solution of queer crisis.

The technologies of rescripting and teleprompting in "A Bright LGBT Life" are centered around the four questions that form the backbone of all interviews on the TV show, which include: (1) When and how did you discover your real gender identity/sexual orientation (*giới tính thật)*?; (2) When did you decide to come out, and how did people react to that?; (3) Have you experienced discrimination at your workplace?; and (4) What are your hopes and plans for the future?

With these questions guiding the progression of the show, the editors would develop more personal questions so that the host could dive deeper into the individual stories of each participant. At this stage, the editors have the authority to remold these stories into neatly structured versions dubbed by their voice, trimmed in certain places, while accentuated in others. The first question about the discovery or exploration of one's "true" gender or sexual identity is designed to solicit narratives about one's childhood experiences. The production team saw the childhood trauma the queer subjects undergo as the justification, foundation, or catalyst for their realization of their non-normative

genders and sexualities. Childhood trauma is also imagined as determining their decision to migrate and their future ambitions. In the filming site, it was taken for granted that all queer bodies struggled through their childhood years with traumatic hangover haunting their adulthood.

In the filming session of Trà, the team's insistence on elaborating her story of childhood trauma – otherwise, it is too *sơ sài* - anchors this dual construction of the blood family as the start and end points of queer life. The team member's comments that I quoted earlier, for example, explained why the family must be the origin:

> "It is a must for all characters in the show. Stories about childhood make up one
> of the core four questions that all characters are expected to answer. We must
> learn about the hardship they experienced when they were young, because that is
> the case for all of them. *Only then can we understand why* they decided to leave
> their house, quarrel with their parents, or go through transsexual surgeries
> [emphasis added]."

Their statements attributed the adolescent crises, gender expressions, and sexual choices in queer adult lives to the relationship they had with their family at a young age. The comprehensibility of queer adult life, therefore, is contingent on their ability to reflect on, grasp with, and narrativize this early phase of familial interactions. The mode of *knowing* one's genders, sexualities, and even sense of self becomes chained to the heteronormative logic of the biological family. Even in their adulthood, the queer subject could only reproduce themselves through a retrospective-yet-present knowledge of how the blood family has shaped and is shaping them. A model answer to the question of

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"How do you know you are LGBT?" is thereby exemplified in Giang's interview, another participant self-identified as a transgender woman:

> "I remember that my mother once took me to a clothes shop when I was a little kid, and I insisted on buying girly dresses and skirts. She did not agree and bought boys' clothes for me. When I was small, I used to steal clothes from my mom's closet to wear. She used to scold me a lot when she saw me in her dress. At that time, I already know I was different from other boys."

The tension in Giang's relationship with her mother, triggered by her embodiment of non-normative gender, was postulated as the *origin story,* one that holds the key to understanding her gender and sexual expressions, or her "true self." Her mother's scolding and her stubborn choice of feminine clothing, in a way, become singularized into coterminous *evidence* of her gender transgression, almost as if the scolding itself verifies her "discovery of transgender self" even more than her actual non-normative desires and practices. On this note, the narration of childhood familial trauma authorizes and authenticates the knowledge of one's own genders and sexualities, which not only reaffirms the essentialist model of knowing LGBT identities but also maps LGBT lives onto a heteronormative plain untethered from the blood family. This mode of knowing harbors the evidential force of "witnessing" familial memories, which Han (2020) saw as depoliticizing the category of "family" itself, stabilizing it as an institution formed outside of the traumatic events being narrated. This evidential force is derived partially from a teleological construction of adulthood as mastery over a narrative of the self, which was hidden either in the unconscious or the ignorant of a child's mind and body

(Han 2021). In other words, the act of verifying one's traumatic formation of queer identity through narrativizing familial memories as an adult postulates the blood family as always already a priori, rather than implicated and troubled by such queerness. Simultaneously, Giang's post-event testimony of what Han (2021) called "ordinary tragedies" resorts to the postmemorial work of "reactivating and reembodying more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures" (Hirsch 2012, 111), thus mobilizing adult stable signifiers to produce coherent personal history. This raises the questions of how much of the post-Đổi Mới (re)construction of the heteronormative family and restrictive gender binary bleeds into the intimate memories of these queer subjects, or how much of Vietnamese state outlawing of homosexuality in the 2000s works as a palimpsest to their personal histories, especially through a transgenerational structure of inheriting a shared past. Yet it is much clearer how such memorial transformative processes culminated in the Vietnamese media production of LGBT representations, which establishes the legibility of queer identifications and desires upon the essence of familial trauma. The stretch of reproductive futurism, in this manner, takes as its natural departure point the irresistibly foundational time-space of the heteronormative household.

Not only as the origin story of queer life, the production of LGBT representations in this media setting also strove to construct the blood family as the endpoint of queer life, enclosing "straight time" (Munoz 2009) in a circular loop of normative motion. The preliminary interview that one team member conducted with Trà unveiled how the show produced the LGBT representation in ways that sustained and policed such closed

temporality. Throughout the interview, Trà talked multiple times about her failed relationship with her family members and the entailed sentiment of hopelessness she developed:

"My mom said terrible things that hurt me deeply, things we couldn't imagine a mother would tell her child. I do not want to repeat what she said, but I can just say it was very hurtful. My dad has stopped talking to me altogether. I stopped sharing anything about my life with him. We are as distanced as strangers."

When the team member pressed if there was any family member who supported her, Trà said:

"Maybe there is my grandma, who would still remind me to eat good food and take care. But her presence alone cannot offset this sad stuff. My aunt is the worst. She yelled at me and called me names. She would also scold my mom for not knowing how to raise me into a normal person."

Later, when Trà told us about the sisterhood she gained in the urban city that pulled her through dark and poor times, she blurted out that her family has become strangers and strangers have become her family. However, the team member did not hesitate to follow up with an off-beat question: "But do you think about winning the acceptance of your family? Have you ever thought of sitting down with your mom and having a sincere conversation about all of this?" To this, Trà simply said: "No! Because I already know she would respond with more hurtful things."

On the filming set of Trà's episode, similar moments recurred. When Trà finished talking about her dream career, which was to become a successful high-fashion model,

the team member backstage discussed the final question about future plans: "Let's ask her about the future hope for family reunion. Like, how does she hope her mother would react after seeing her on the show?" The two members agreed to instruct the host to ask Trà about her hopes for her mother's acceptance of her and the prospect of reuniting with her family. The question brought her to tears, which did not happen at all during the preliminary interview. While she shed these silents tears, the member backstage instructed the cameraman to take a close-up shot zooming into her face. After taking a quiet moment to find her words, Trà finally said: "If possible, I hope my mom could hear me and understand my heart."

Trà's sense of hopelessness in her biological family enabled a sense of hopefulness in her queer family, yet the production team insisted that she recuperated her "real" family regardless of alternative bonds she might have nourished. While doing so, the team showed an inability to empathize which almost resembled a disregard for the "ordinary tragedies" Trà confided in them, from verbal abuse to abandonment by different family members. At the same time, the camerawork, which zooms into Trà's tearful face, spectacularizes her negative affect for public consumption. The guiding questions from the member - "Have you ever thought of sitting down with your mom and having a sincere conversation about all of this?" and "What does she hope her mother would react after seeing her on the show?" - spell out the mapping of blood ties and familial harmony onto queer futurity. By hammering in on the prospect of acceptance by her blood family, anchored in the dreamt harmony between Trà and her mother, the team member also dismissed Trà's experiences of queer kin as a final-and-unfolding chapter of

her story. The life narrative is considered incomplete, missing, or left ajar with such articulations of alternative queer family. The wholeness of her life and selfhood cannot rift from the wholeness of her blood family.

This mode of enclosing queer temporalities within the parameters of the blood family differs from the production of progressive, gay-liberation times underpinned by the event of coming out in the Euro-American context. When Manalansan (2003) pinpointed coming out as a phenomenological production of gay identity, they acknowledged how the gay subject is set up to run away from home. The valorization of individualistic separation from familial bonds as well as the equation of verbally proclaiming a secret true self with liberation both engender the growth of the gay self. The significance of such individuation from the family was first addressed by John D'Emilio (1993), who saw the emergence of gay identity as blossoming out of individuals' migration to urbanized zones and severance of family and kinship bonds. Trà's queer identifications and desires, in this case, were neither validated through her process of disassociating with her family or singularizing her subjecthood as a free, agential individual. Instead of tearing queer life into privatized fragments liberated from the familial closet, the intrusive question - "But do you think about the possibility of winning the acceptance of your family?" - attests to the relentless force of driving queer life back to the blood family, wrapping the queer body in a looped temporality unwaveringly pinned down by heteronormative life.

The rejection of Trà's narratives on alternative queer kin also differs from how the Euro-American queer body is reincorporated into heteronormative temporalities through

the institutions of same-sex marriage and child adoption. Such reincorporation was traced by Weston (1997) alongside the discursive and material shift from "blood" to "choice" in the American context, which enabled a mode of being individualistically queer, with subjective agency to choose and build familial bonds outside the meanings of procreation or biology. The new meaning of the "chosen family," therefore, allows the American queer subject to inhabit "straight time." Eng (2003) further theorized how children adoption prevailed as an option for queer couples in the matrix of racial, gendered, and globalized power dynamics of American society. The ideal of the white nuclear family enmeshes queerness within the reproduction of multiculturalist post-racism, commodification of gendered labor, and construction of Third World primitivism. The case of Vietnam, however, reveals a production of heteronormative time distinct from such hegemonic processes of inventing the queer family. Trà's articulation of queer kinship was neither signified through the system of liberal meanings that legitimized concepts of free will, subjective power, and individuation, nor assimilated into the grid of normative power. Instead, the narrative of alternative queer relationalities was superseded by the insistence on a collectivized queer selfhood permanently tethered to the blood family despite arcs of migration, trauma, or failures. The biological family continues to trouble and articulate queer subjectivities regardless of whatever queer families being cultivated. The looped heteronormative temporality always seeks to close its circle instead of opening up for alternate times.

Therefore, the case of Vietnam sheds light on how the post-revolutionary, market-socialist society articulates "straight times" and "queer times" against the backdrop of

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neo-traditionalist and developmentalist heteronormativity, producing a looped

reproductive temporality deviating from the Western model of progressive gay-liberation

temporality. Specifically, the post-Đổi Mới revitalization of neo-Confucian patriarchal

and heteronormative norms served the developmentalist demands for family unit-based

labor structure and reproductive sexualities (Werner 2002). The construction of recursive

timeline thus wraps the queer subject within the circle of the blood family, foreclosing

life outside the heteronormative futures of familial love and harmony.

Feeling Hopeless: The Disciplining of Affect and Queer Refusal

In engendering the looped temporality scaffolded by the heteronormative family, the

production of LGBT representations in the show disciplines the affect of hope, which

allows such normative futurity to reproduce itself. The queer subjects, nonetheless,

engage in an affect of hopelessness that undoes the force of "cruel optimism" (Berlant

2011) underpinned by gendered hierarchy as well as enacts a politics of refusal that

generates alternative modes of living queer dislodged from assimilationist futurities.

Indeed, the production team strove to inculcate a hopeful sentiment in their

representation of Trà as a Vietnamese transgender woman, especially through the

questions they interjected into her self-narrative:

"But do you think about the possibility of winning the acceptance of your family?

Have you ever thought of sitting down with your mom and having a sincere

conversation about all of this?"

"How does she hope her mother would react after seeing her on the show?"

In the course of embedding queer life in the looped timeline of heteronormative familial essentialism, these questions from the team member seek to naturalize such temporal rationalities through the affect of hope, or what Berlant (2011) termed "cruel optimism." This affective structure responds to the constancy of "crisis ordinariness," in this case the frequent and predictable rejection, violence, and abandonment Trà encounters in her interactions with her family, through a model of "ordinary pleasures," which incline the disappointed subjects to inhabit new conventionalities of fantasizing about social and intimate changes. As Berlant elucidated, the recasting of Trà's desires toward new clusters of promises about familial acceptance and love becomes cruel when its entailed pleasures turn to sustain the situation of tragedy itself, instead of contesting or unsettling its logic of harm. In other words, keeping Trà hopeful about the prospect of familial love continues to normalize the blood family at the pith of queer desires and futurity. Notably, the focus on the mother-daughter relationship in the former question reveals the interlacing of time and what Halberstam (2011) discerned as Oedipalized womanhood. The mother is always already the incarnation of history, tradition, and memory, while the daughter is posited as either her inheritor or a faceless, voiceless subaltern. The affect of hope that the queer subject is emplaced in, thereby, simultaneously compels them to anticipate the continuity of heteronormative familial traditions passing through the body of the mother. Both Werner (2002) and Pettus (2003) affirm such reconstructions of the female body as the material symbol of Vietnamese national identity after the flooding waves of Đổi Mới. Culminated at the pinnacle of paradoxical moralizing in this transitional period, the post-Đổi Mới woman is inscribed to

carry both the meanings of socialist heroism and neo-Confucian domestic femininity, playing the empowered modern citizen and the reproductive mother simultaneously. In the same vein, the embodiment of hope demanded of Trà has the capacity to reproduce both the heteronormative futurity revolving around the blood family and reproductive femininity as the guardian of national traditions and socio-temporal order.

Trà, however, illuminated an affect of hopelessness that anchors a politics of refusal wreaking havoc at the enclosed futurity of the heteronormative family and thereby forging unthinkable ways of being queer. When asked to imagine a future of reconciling with her mother, Trà simply refused to embrace the optimistic vision offered to her: "No! Because I already know she would respond with more hurtful things."

The form of "knowing" that Trà claimed in this statement brings forth Berlant's discussion of reconstituted intuitions as productive ways of negotiating the tragic present (2011). By rewiring one's affective attachments to conventional intimate optimism, the subject acquires new habitual and spontaneous modes of knowing that allow an impasse/impassivity constantly reckoning with everyday precarity. By claiming to always already know the inevitability of harm done by her mother, Trà inhabited a space of passivity, silence, and absence from the normative grid of mother-daughter relationships and familial harmony woven against the backdrop of post-Đổi Mới Vietnam. On the run of the heteronormative time, Trà is considered inert, even invisible. Yet it is this "subjugated knowledge" that carves out spaces for Trà to "refuse to think back through the mother" (Halberstam 2011), disrupting the lineage of womanhood as reproductive

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mothers of heteronormative temporal and spatial order. Such negation of the heteronormative generational logic culminated in her articulation of queer kin:

> "Since I came here, I have a group of sisters (*hội chị em*) who protects and helps me through everything. They were the first ones to give me clothing, make-up, and do my hair. They boost my confidence in being myself and living boldly. When I worked at this place, I was very close with the group of female workers there. When the male employees and customers harassed me for my look and my sexuality, they would stand up for me. Only my sisters could understand me, because they suffered the same pains under these men."

In affirming these alternate bonds, Trà also rejected the blood family as the ultimate center of time:

> "I do not think of them as my family for a long time already. They wouldn't care even if I talk. It is funny how people so-called my family treat me like strangers, and so-called strangers treat me like family."

Her reclamation of sisterhood formulated amidst urban clusters of inequalities seeds what Halberstam (2011) coined "shadow feminisms," a politics of negation instead of the identity politics that binds itself to the normative cruelty of optimism. The affect of hopelessness, in the vein of Edelman's elucidation of the "impossible project of queer oppositionality" (2004), escapes the death drive Edelman theorized as the endpoint of persistent queer negativity. Instead, hopelessness is pregnant of hope for alternative queer kin and thus unimaginable queer futurity, resembling what Munoz (2009) saw as the utopian affect of a then-and-there queer horizon.

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CHAPTER 5

THIRD EYE: QUEER SPECTATORSHIP OF LGBT TV

> "I'm annoyed at how these shows give cis, heterosexual people the freedom to
>
> guess and assume about queer people. It's not their space! I just want to tell them
>
> "Sit down, you don't know anything!""

Phương told me when I asked them whether they enjoyed watching LGBT TV shows in

Vietnam. Though struggling between foreign terms such as non-binary, agender, queer,

and local conceptions of transgender (*người chuyển giới*) and tomboi, Phương

demarcated a strong distinction between the queer community, themselves included, and

heterosexual people in this statement. Phương's perception of who has the authority to

discursively definee queerness stems from such demarcation, which in turn allows them

to renounce the heterosexual gaze imposed upon the queer bodies in these shows. Indeed,

Phương's statement revealed how the mainstream LGBT TV shows could not be seen

beyond the heteronormative reception that rippled off their assimilationist venoms.

Echoing the sentiment of many other interview participants, such mockery and rejection

of these shows attest to the alternative modes of queer life lapping against the

respectability politics at the heart of LGBT representations on these shows. The queer

audiences' frustration at LGBT identity politics paves the way from their embrace of

alternative politics and futurity which constitutes the queer worldmaking practices

anchored by their (dis)spectatorship of LGBT TV.

This chapter pieces together the extratextual affect and embodiments of the queer

audiences who watch Vietnamese LGBT TV shows in disappointment, frustration, and

even campy satire. Drawing on the semi-formal interviews with 8 queer participants, I argue that their practices of spectatorship disrupt the respectability politics that disciplines LGBT representations in these shows to produce the modern, moral queer subject belonging to the nation. In particular, my own positionality, embodying both queerness and somewhat womanhood, orients my research toward the gaze back of female-identified or sapphic subjects (none of my interview participants are cis, gay men). Therefore, their spectatorship of these LGBT shows articulates an intersectional feminist, queer critique of liberal, androcentric Pride politics. Specifically, the queer audiences reject rigid LGBT identifications based on Euro-American, cis gay male experiences, while deviating from the linearized temporality that assimilates the respectable queer into class hierarchy and cultural-moral fabric of the Vietnamese nation. In wrestling with such respectability politics, the queer subjects find themselves crafting alternative radical, inter-Asian pathways of queer relationalities and futurity.

Refusing LGBT Identities

While Vietnamese LGBT TV shows, including *The Good LGBT Life* where I conducted ethnographic research, imbued essentialist LGBT identity categories with knowledge of "modernities," the queer audiences in my research rejected such rigid identifications in the shows and, instead, craft alternative feminist pathways toward queer relationalities and futurity. In this way, their inability to claim or embody a legible LGBT identity constitutes the queer failures that Halberstam (2011) saw as preserving the anarchical counterhegemonic power of queer life.

Dân's reactions to these shows illuminated these failures, as her frustration at the stiffening LGBT boxes in these shows hinted at the queer politics of refusal embedded in the act of losing, forgoing, and forgetting about identifications altogether. Dân is a young woman in her late 20s, who has migrated from Da Lat to Ho Chi Minh city for university education and work about 10 years ago. Sitting opposite me in a crowded, noisy cafe in Ho Chi Minh city, Dân shared with me intimate thoughts about the past few relationships she has had with tomboi, lesbian people as well as her tenuous interactions with her family. Before I had a chance to ask for her opinions about the LGBT TV shows in the country, Dân brought the topic up with visible frustration: "When I watched LGBT TV shows, I feel like it tries confine (*gò bó*) people into LGBT labels. I don't feel like I need those labels, so I stopped watching after a few episodes." When I asked her to elaborate on this sentiment, Dân explained:

> "I remember scrolling on Facebook and seeing a video about people who love LGBT people but without sexual desires. I have also seen female friends who can give each other the feelings of love. I realize that there is no need for any definition of a person's gender. People might still come up with names to call these folks, but I do not remember or pay attention to those terms. I feel like these words do not capture the feelings accurately. There is actually no need for any words."

By denouncing the LGBT representations on these TV shows as confining (*gò bó*), Dân articulated multiple experiences of queerness not captured by these identity categories, especially her lived experiences of homoerotic and homosocial intimacies. In

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this case, Dân's experiences of "female friends who can give each other the feelings of love" epitomizes with what Todd (2020) called "queer blindness" in the edited volume *Queer Korea.* In other words, female-exclusive homoeroticism or homosociality constitutes mode of non-normative intimacies, silenced within the dominant histories and assimilated into the hetero-marital cultures to be merely a practice run for or an escapist route out of heterosexual marriage (Todd 2020). In the same volume, Chen (2020) dissected the expressions and sites of female-exclusive homoeroticism to excavate "subaltern traces of a counterdiscourse," or a queer mode of life that exposes the logic of exception in modern "free love" regulating the female subject. Similarly, Dân's resignification of female friendship as queer love critiques the systemic blindness that relegates female-exclusive homosociality to neither legitimate marital love nor marginal LGBT identifications. On this note, homoerotic experiences between queer women also reemerged in other participants' narratives, which not only diagnosed the "queer blindness" of the dominant discourses of modern love, but also spelt out the limiting efficacy of identity-based LGBT politics. Gia, as a prominent example, is a participant who has recounted to me her puzzling relationship with Linh, her best friend, who knew and lived with her since high school years. Always joked and rumored to be lesbian lovers who would grow old together through the ebbs and flows of faltering heterosexual flings, Gia and Linh never pronounced anything close to queerness or lesbianism, yet continuing to intimate an unspeakable entanglement of flirtatiousness, togetherness, and sisterly care. The homoerotic gray zones they both inhabited rendered queerness unintelligible, thus estimating the affective register that Gopinath (2018) saw as "fall[ing]

outside the grasp of what is readily imagined as knowable within the logic of the surveillance state" (147). Juxtaposing Dân's comments with Gia's lived experiences, I contend that female-exclusive homosociality constituted a state of suspension existing outside of either hetero-marital love or LGBT identifications, allowing the female subjects to sustain alternative plains of queer life. Coming back to Dân's rejection of LGBT identity categorizations on Vietnamese TV shows, their lived experiences of female homoeroticism enabled the queer audiences to remain struggling with the strict disciplining of identifications imported and imposed from elsewhere.

On a different note, Dân was able to utilize social media platforms, specifically Facebook, to question, refuse, and eventually forget the liberal language of LGBT identity politics. While paying attention to the homoerotic gazes between women in Vietnamese popular cultures, Lan Duong (2012) contended that they not only challenged the masculinist gaze but also manipulated technological tools to fashion the modern female subject in counter to traditional nationalist womanhood. Dân's employment of digital technologies, in this way, allowed her transgressive rejection of LGBT identity categories. Refusing to either "remember or pay attention to those terms," Dân performed a forgetting that Halberstam (2011) saw as an alternative mode of knowing, one that breaks with the positivist force of identity and memory while transplanting queer life onto new temporal plains totally different from familial inheritance. Dân indicated her awareness of the new vocabulary emerging to classify more sexualities, yet she refused to marry back into the progressive temporality of assimilating the sexual Other into the normative flow of history. In other words, the technologically mediated experiences of

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female homosociality forged queer temporalities through Dân's active forgetting of the homonormative language of LGBT identifications.

Dân's refusal of LGBT identifications resonates with other participants I have talked to, but Chi's rejection of both "lesbian" and "transgender" is the most critical of how LGBT identity politics reinforced hegemonic masculinity as well as co-constitutive gender and class hierarchy in its process of negotiating for public acceptance. Chi is a 27-yeard-old queer person working in a governmental agency in Đà Lạt, whose gracious humor glazed over even the most traumatic stories they narrated. When I asked Chi whether they enjoyed watching LGBT TV shows in Vietnam, they told me they tended to gravitate toward other content because of their discomfort with the mainstream LGBT community in Vietnam. Chi elaborated on this part by telling me about their intimate experiences of these community circles:

> "When I was younger, I used to have a lot of transguy friends and join many LGBT community activities. But they started calling me "not manly enough" (*không đủ nam tính*). In their mind, there is only male and female. They want to be with "real men." These transguys all struggle to eat more and go to gym to build their muscles. They also play the role (*diễn*) by speaking loudly and bluntly. But I cannot make my body into a man's body. It is really tiring to play along with societal standards. At the workplace, people would still look down on transguys who don't look masculine, who looks like they are faking it (*bịa đặt*)."

From there, Chi opened up to me how their discomfort with the transgender communities in Vietnam was in fact rooted in the debate around pronouns:

"I am very flexible about pronouns. People can call me anything. But many people in this group are extremist about this (*cực đoan*). In a group I used to be part of in Saigon, I was infamous for having bad fashion style. People would call me "con lét Đà Lạt" behind my back and bad mouth about me. From then I realized that people in the same community could also discriminate against one another. Another incident is about the pronouns. I am a chilled person and have no strong opinion about this. But many transguys are specific about being called "*anh*" (he). If someone mistakenly called them "*chị*" (she), they would get really mad. Sometimes the elderly just did not know how to address them correctly, but they would make a fuss out of that and ruin the gathering. Gradually I do not want to be seen as part of that group. I cannot integrate myself in (*không hoà nhập được*)."

Chi explained how their ambivalence toward the identification of transgender stemmed from such shared expectations of masculinity in the trans community.

"Deep down I want to have the male physique and have cool beards. But I feel like transforming myself into that figure takes so much money and time. I don't want to wake up every day having to think about how to turn myself into "that man." Even though I like the gentle style of masculinity, I was endowed with a feminine appearance with short height and a small waist. Whatever men's clothes I try on do not fit me and make me feel less confident. At the same time, I feel like I have been hurt so much by this transguy label that looking like a man is no longer a concern. Now I just don't care about that anymore."

The verbal violence Chi withstood within the very transgender communities is illuminating of how interlocking gender and class hierarchies police LGBT identifications. First, a legitimate transguy must unfailingly embody hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, muscular build, vocal speech, and masculine clothing become the markers of transguy identifications, inscribed onto the trans body to regulate their subjectivities and exclude those falling outside of such masculinist parameters. By failing to uphold these expectations, Chi was othered as "*con lét Đà Lạt*," a term localizing the Western category of lesbian yet in a derogatory way. In this case, masculinization of the trans body followed the logic that Nguyen (2014) exposed as reinstating white male patriarchal hegemony by stigmatizing effeminacy or feminization of the queer body. Nguyen (2014) called such masculinization assimilationist and limited inclusionary politics, as its misogynistic logic forecloses the possibility of coalition politics between the queers and the feminists. At the same time, Tran (2014) has traced how the construction of the masculine gay body sprouted in the context of post-Đổi Mới Vietnam through the transmittance of European sexuality discourses into the country. In this discourse which segregates gender from sexuality for gay legitimacy, the gender-conforming queer thus embodies the post-liberation body, while the effeminate, gender-transgressive queer is relegated to the shadow of pre-liberation past. More expansively, the renunciation of effeminacy and gender-crossing in Southeast Asia rooted in colonial histories, in which the colonial powers disciplined the local populations by equating local gender transgressive practices with cultural and racial inferiority (Blackwood 2005). These overlapping histories of colonialism and imperialism interrupted Chi's experiences

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of trans communities in Vietnam, as the colonial hermaphrodite and the postcolonial effeminate gay both haunt their existence at the lower rung and on the margin of transgender legitimate masculinity. Against this backdrop, Chi's disillusion with the transguy communities and LGBT identities altogether broke open an alternative pathway toward queer politics. By embracing femininity with ambivalence, Chi enacted what Nguyen (2014) envisioned as an "ethical mode of relationality," one that recuperates effeminacy as a pleasurable and productive mode of being queer. In other words, their rejection of LGBT identities and embodiment of transgressive effeminacy expose and break away from the logic of hegemonic masculinity governing transgender relationalities.

Simultaneously, Chi's testimony unveiled how class hierarchy articulated and reproduced the dominance of hegemonic masculinity within the transgender communities. Chi themselves held regrets over their inability to "transform into a man," which they attributed to their lack of financial resources and temporal cushion. The process of inscribing masculinity onto one's body not only consumes the monetary spare one has for the right kinds of clothes or hairstyle but also engulfs one's daily time into quotidian acts of going to the gym, preparing and eating a certain diet, etc. Mai (2017) echoes this point, demonstrating how class status, attached to urbanism, multculturalism, and consumerism, divides the queer communities In Vietnam. The label "*con lét Đà Lạt*" used to mock Chi exudes similar class connotations. The specific locality of Đà Lạt, a small city in Lâm Đồng province, is juxtaposed with Saigon, the context of the group. Thereby, class status of Chi is simultaneously defined by what Halberstam (2005) called

metronormativity, or the normative trajectory of the queer subjects migrating from rural to urban cities, which posited the urban metropolis as the hub of gay liberation and civilization. In other words, Chi found themselves on the fringe of multiple habitus – both the gender-conforming masculinity and metronormative class hierarchy.

Finally, the queer audiences' frustration with identity-based development of the queer selfhood in TV shows engendered an alternative mode of queer life embedded in the affect of the everyday. Continuing with Chi, their displacement of the high-production mainstream LGBT TV shows dialectically amplified the quotidian they engaged in through their spectatorship of grassroot-produced, social media-mediated queer content. This practice enacted different relationships that the queer subjects have with the past and the present.

> "Do you watch auntie Hai Báo (*cô Hai Báo)*? I love watching *cô Hai Báo* and *mợ*
> *Hai Báo.* Sometimes the substance is empty, just two of them eating together. I
> am totally mesmerized (*đam mê*) by those funny *lê thị bí ẩn* content on TikTok."

Chi is referring to Ngọc Linh and Ngọc Huyền, a queer couple in their 30s living in Đồng Nai, who started making TikTok videos under the name *cô Hai Báo* and *mợ Hai Báo* since July 2023. The "empty" content Chi mentioned described the moments of them eating, cooking, and talking from the intimate spaces of their shared home. Chi also laughed out loud when using the term *lê thị bí ẩn* to capture this type of media, which is a playful tweak of the word "lesbian" connoting a sense of humor and community. The word *bí ẩn* can be translated as secretive or mysterious, which delivers an air of secrecy only comprehensible to a group of female queer insiders. Altogether Chi was able to

derive pleasures from watching the mundane activities in a queer life, encoded in a comedic language that "may not easily coalescence into an easily intelligible or quantifiable form of political coalition" (Gopinath 2018, 129). On the one hand, this quotidian form of queerness catalyzes a queer archive of non-normative female intimacies submerged in the official archive of developmentalist and nationalist histories. Rendering significant the everyday life of two queer women located outside of the urban hubs of Ho Chi Minh city or Hanoi, Chi disturbed the boundaries and hierarchies between the trivialized histories of female homoeroticism and the spectacularized narratives of nation-building. Their spectatorship practices thus unfolded what Gopinath (2018) called the "erotohistoriography" of the everyday (153), bursting out of the developmental temporality of nationalist and homonormative LGBT politics with suspended moments of queer times. At the same time, by making gender nonconformity unremarkable, this alternative media actualized ordinary queer bodily dwelling, thus "imaging a different present" for the queer subjects (Gopinath 2018, 160). This site of spectatorship thus stalled the extrapolation of the Western, cis gay male grandiose scene of public visibility and liberation in favor of the antimonumental but enabling queer life. Connected with my analysis of Chi's critiques of LGBT identity-based TV, this alternate media route gives rise to a quotidian way of living queer that wrestles with the demands to integrate into the nation or the Pride movement.

The power of the everyday also led Minh, a 24-year-old office worker in Hanoi, to disavow the assimilationist and homonormative impulses of LGBT identity-based politics. Minh came to the interview with a blurred sense of queerness, totally illegible

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within the LGBT grid. Never been in a relationship with same-sex partners, Minh has

instead been consistently infatuated with female and queer figures both in media and in

her life. She shared ferociously about the Vietnamese women in sports whose fan circles

she engaged deeply with. When I asked her how she felt about the LGBT TV shows in

Vietnam, Minh expressed a nonchalant attitude toward the idea of an LGBT community:

> "I don't relate to these shows because I have never gone through that phase of
>
> asking who I am. It (*nó*) just comes naturally with my emotions, simply as a part
>
> of life. There is no need to search for who I am. I just think of my future as
>
> depending on fate (*tuỳ duyên*), and I will be happy anyway. When it comes to
>
> romance, I feel like gender does not matter as much as our emotions. So I don't
>
> watch these shows to find anyone like me. I don't feel the need to find any
>
> comrades (*đồng bọn*) because what I do is nothing wrong."

Minh eschewed the valorization of LGBT identity categories in these TV shows

due to the entailed reproduction of queer deviancy in those claims. By denying the need

to "find any comrades" and proving that her gender or sexuality was "right," Minh

implied that the adamant enforcement of LGBT identifications functioned as a plea for

guilt dissolution, thus legitimizing queerness only on the grounds of shame. In this way,

Minh attested to the complex agency of female queer subjects living under the banner of

affirmative LGBT movements that Chua (2018) elucidated in the context of Myanmar.

Similar to lesbians and queer women in Chua's research, Minh's interwoven embodiment

of womanhood and queerness sensitized her to the masculinist, heteronormative nature of

the movement's quest for social belonging and dignity. Otherwise, Minh would have to

perform the "grievance transformation" that turned her into a good woman - one who is ashamed of her past suffering but responsible for her individual liberation from it - in order to represent a worthy human rights bearer (Chua 2018, 63-88). Evidently, at another point during the interview, Minh lamented at the exclusive abundance of gay male figures on these TV shows and attributed her lack of interest in these shows on that imbalance. Her rerouting toward female figures as the pith of queer desires thus displaced such masculinist normativity for more feminist queer relationalities.

In this way, Minh's evocation of the everyday as an alternative for LGBT identifications produced a different relation to gay shame, the same way Hà, the queer participant in Chapter 3, disputed the production of "good shame" in the queer body. Minh claimed that "it" (*nó*) was a part of the daily that she did not have to search or name, without ever clarifying to referencing what "it" stood for. Thereby, she shrouded queerness in an unknowability that, just like Chi's deployment of "secrecy," "escapes intelligibility within the normative forms of knowledge production upon which the surveillance state depends" (Gopinath 2018, 147). Indeed, people surrounding Minh including her parents, relatives, and colleagues often met her fanatic desires for female and queer figures with confusion rather than violence or humiliation. They usually found themselves silently retreating from the topic or laughing along with Minh awkwardly. With the same humorous and cavalier tone Minh used during the interview, she stunted the homophobic forces from the larger society she immersed in by frustrating its ability to know, surveil, and police her gender and sexual non-normativities. Hence the affect of the everyday allowed Minh to reject the weight of shame used to discipline the queer subjects

reproduced by LGBT identity politics, enabling queer life in alternative modes of quotidian shamelessness.

Overall, the discontentment of the queer audiences with LGBT TV shows in Vietnam is anchored by their critiques of the essentialist identity categories produced and policed by these shows. Such affect proved generative of alternative queer relationalities and futurity beyond the normative, assimilationist paradigm of identity politics. These alternative modes of queer life sow the feminist projects of innovating subaltern spaces within the dominant masculinist, heteronormative, and metronormative structure undergirding the Vietnamese nation.

Disrupting Respectability Politics

In previous chapters, I have teased out different layers of respectability politics that shaped the production of LGBT representations on Vietnamese TV, stretching beyond class status to envelope socialist and neo-Confucian cultural-moral values. This section leverages these critiques to dissect the responses of the queer audiences to the crafting of the respectable queers on these TV shows. Not only renouncing the essentialist LGBT identities produced through Vietnamese TV shows, the queer audiences in my research also questioned and disrupted the respectability politics that governs LGBT representations. Critiquing both the class hierarchy and cultural-moral principles that disciplined the queer subjects on TV, these audiences turned to grassroot-produced queer media and embodied the very shameless and hopeless queers sanitized from popular representations.

First, multiple participants in my research strayed away from mainstream LGBT TV shows out of their frustration at the production of the respectable queers. Dân continued to express such sentiment when she talked about how LGBT TV shows privileged the successful queers:

"When I watch [these shows], I feel like they pedestalize (*tôn sùng*) the successful archetype. Everyone who appeared on TV looked flamboyant (*hào nhoáng*), rich (*giàu có*), and famous (*nổi tiếng*). It feels like only when you are successful will the society accept your sexuality."

Dân went on an impassioned vent about her dissatisfaction with this cult around "success" and outrightly told me she had forgone the LGBT TV shows on such ground:

"Success is like a ticket for these people to do other things the society does not accept. I feel like this creates such a huge pressure for queer folks because they now feel like they have to succeed at all costs. [These shows] build this ideal figure of a rich and high-status LGBT person for them to pursue. People who cannot succeed in the same way have to face bad things. Same for me. I always felt like I had to succeed and used to feel super stressed. 9 out of 10 of my friends feel the same thing to a negative extent. So I quit after watching a few episodes."

Other participants followed Dân's footsteps in steering away from LGBT TV shows due to the sanitized representations in conformity with conventional notions of success and beauty. Gia, a 24-year-old participant living in Hanoi, pointed out such a force of respectability politics in LGBT TV with a rather bitter attitude:

"Your look is everything. All the most famous transwomen in media get accepted because they have done the surgeries to look just like a woman. The elderly people seem to hate anyone half-male half-female (*nửa nam nửa nữ*). These trans people turn entirely into women with beautiful appearances, so they become influential on TV."

When I asked Gia why she did not watch LGBT TV shows in Vietnam, she implied that these shows were designed for the heterosexual public, not people like her, in order to win their acceptance from the idealized successful LGBT figure:

"[LGBT TV shows] serve the needs of the normal public (*dân chúng bình thường*). They help them know of people like Hương Giang, who are seen as talented and rich. That's how these shows try to win the public's tolerance of queer people."

Spectatorship thus became a disidentificatory site for these queer audiences to expose the assimilationist and exclusionary undercurrent of LGBT representation politics articulated on mainstream TV. On the one hand, the queer audiences critiqued how LGBT visibility on these shows worked to interpellate the queers into the hegemonic space of the partly neoliberal and heteronormative nation. As both participants evoked a similar notion of economic success tainted with individualistic and liberal ideas, they contended that the queer body is rendered legible only when marked by productivity, consumerism, or classed aesthetics. Dân drew attention to the logic of exception at the core of this representation politics, attesting to her own and fellow lower-class queer experiences of failures in this supposedly liberal principle. On the other hand, Gia's reference to Hương

Giang, a transwoman celebrity widely famous and loved in Vietnam, unveiled how a

respectable trans/queer body must interpellate themselves back into the gender binary,

preserving the heteronormative order. Together the queer audiences mobilized what Rony

(1996) called "the third eye" to contextualize the gaps between the media narratives and

their lived experiences. In this way, they performed what I called a practice of

(dis)spectatorship, borrowing from Munoz's concept of disidentification (1999), which

enabled them to destabilize the exclusionary class and gender script inked onto these

media.

Echoing Dân's comments, Chi explained their venture away from these

mainstream LGBT media down on grounds of the respectability standards imposed upon

the LGBT figures on TV. Instead, they embarked on an alternative queer media pathway,

which was the grassroot-produced content on social media:

"LGBT TV shows always choose the beautiful people. In the Southwest *(miền*

Tây), the community is very big, but they don't look glamorous like those on TV.

They are usually considered ugly, rural (*quê mùa*), and are discriminated against.

These people lead tough lives, and their videos on TikTok are of low quality, but I

am passionate about them. I like to watch such real-life stuff they put on social

media because it feels real and raw without a script. In these rural areas, people

actually accept them. People can be very open-minded (*thoải mái*), and parents

seem to support their children whatsoever. Urban people usually assume that only

the urbaners are open-minded. But I have seen many *lê thị bí ẩn* (lesbian) TikTok

videos from the Southwest and known that they don't look like those on TV

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shows. Then I started questioning whether the stuff on TV was real. In those

TikTok videos, they neither classify themselves into clear identity categories, nor

do they have such high-quality living conditions."

Chi critiqued the logic of respectability politics at the heart of LGBT

representations through an articulation of what Gopinath (2018) called a "queer region"

undoing the metronormative nation. While Gopinath worked with the diasporic context in

the U.S., their conceptualization of "queer regions" as the "subnational spaces that exist

at the margins of dominant national and gay imaginaries" (60) crystallizes the political

efficacy of Chi's affect. By juxtaposing "the rural" with "the urban" in their invocation of

Southwestern queer folks in Vietnam, Chi overturned the metronormative narrative that

produced the uncivilized, oppressed queers from the rural and prompted them toward the

urban for civilization, liberation, and "a good queer life." Instead, Chi contended that the

Southwest is marked with not simply the social acceptance sprung from liberal

multiculturalism, but with local irreverent queer life. Chi also emphasized how such

acceptance of queerness coexisted with poverty, impoverishment, and other life hardship,

thus "disorienting from conventional narratives of success and uplift" (Gopinath 2018,

60) entrapping the respectable queers on TV. Implicitly rejecting a sense of belonging to

the metronormative queer nation, Chi got lost from the hegemonic space of Pride

celebrations to find themselves cultivating alternative spatialities of queer life through

critically and pleasurably driven media pathways. In short, queer spectatorship of LGBT

TV shows led Chi to turn away from the respectable life of urbanized, successful queers

and recuperate the pleasures of living queerly in the rural.

Finally, the queer audiences in my research refuted the script of the whole family central to the crafting of the respectable queer. In previous chapters, especially Chapter 4, I have attempted to elucidate how the process of scripting the whole family for LGBT representations on TV enveloped the queer bodies within the circular reproductive futurity that starts and ends with their biological, heteronormative family. My research participants, however, grew queer life outside of such normative time by refusing the affect of (cruel) hope used to keep them tied to heteronormative ideals of the blood-based family.

Phương was the first the participant to speak dispassionately about Vietnamese LGBT TV shows on such grounds of the adamant "family trope." A 25-year-old arts student from Ho Chi Minh city, Phương had confided their stories of struggling with foreign LGBT labels as well as Vietnamese definitions of womanhood during our interview. After making the vehement comment I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Phương told me honestly that they had no enthusiasm for LGBT TV in Vietnam and only watched it when their family put it on:

"I don't watch LGBT shows because I'm not super intense about representations. I just happened to see them when my family watched them. I feel like [these shows] don't help me understand what people struggle with. For example, family acceptance is always made into one of the biggest things LGBT people deal with. But for me, the best-case scenario is that you feel alone and ashamed, isolated, alienated from family but nothing happens to you, you live on your own. Some people would say that you have to make the adults understand because the adults

are not exposed to the right information. I guess I'm just not interested in convincing them or making them sympathetic. I don't want to help young queer people explain this to their parents but rather to tell them that "it's okay if you don't have their acceptance, and there will be other people who love you out there." I want them to build a community for themselves rather than "let me teach you the right thing and convince your parents."

Then Phương related this comment to their own experiences with their family: "With my parents, we don't really have a relationship, and I don't need to be seen by them. They already don't see me, so I don't need to explain anything to them." This sentiment resonated with Gia, who became reserved when talking about her own experiences with her family: "Being closed with the family is a weakness for bê-đê. For me, they already expect nothing from me. I can ignore them even when they feel sad about me."

In this sense, Phương and Gia joined Trà, the queer participant in the TV show featured in previous chapters, in the politics of refusal articulated by Edelman (2004) and Halberstam (2011) as capable of breaking away from the reproductive futurity and seeding utopic time-space for alternative queer kin. For both of these participants, rejecting the prospect of familial harmony is precipitated by a form of knowing Halberstam (2011) termed "subjugated knowledge." By privileging their lived experiences over the elusive promise of "a good queer life" based on blood-based bonds, both Phương and Gia came to always already know the amount of harm dumped on them by their parents, especially in the form of abandonment and neglect. Instead, the embrace

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of isolation from their family constituted the modes of silence, absence, and negation Halberstam (2011) saw as "shadow feminisms" or the refusal to "look back through the mother" for a genealogy of the queer self. Hopelessness, in this way, is a negative affect productive of alternative queer relationalities and futurity, in particular the kind of queer affiliation Gopinath (2018) described as "the bonds of relationality between subjects and communities without recourse to claims of biological reproduction and patrilineal genealogy" (128). Indeed, Phương's stress on disorienting from the family and reorienting toward the community of people who are able to love queer folks without blood-based ties brew the possibilities of queer futures born out of and beyond the failures of heteronormative generational lineage of belonging. In other words, the hopeless queer audiences who turn away from the family-driven LGBT TV cultivated the "sideways genealogies" (Gopinath 2018, 84) in which the queer self belongs to the unruly, unrespectable kin.

In this section, the queer audiences' discontentment and rejection of LGBT TV shows in Vietnam rooted from their critiques of the logic of respectability disciplining queer visibility. The "third eye" of queer audiences marginalized by the dominant imaginaries of queer respectability worked to expose such representations as assimilationist and exclusionary projects stabilizing class hierarchy and heteronormative order. On such ground, the queer audiences reworked queer belonging to the metronormative nation through alternative media pathways and embodied hopelessness to make life beyond the family-based futurity.

CONCLUSION

FEMINIST FUTURES OF NOT BELONGING

There is no easy answer to the question whether the diverse queer communities in Vietnam have attained social belonging, or even whether they should strive for such belonging. This thesis has been my attempt to use the mainstream LGBT media as the lens looking into the relationship between the queer self and the Vietnamese society, emerging from the new politics of visibility in the country. Media representations and the entailed public visibility end up imposing a system of self-governance articulated through two contradicting logics of individuality and moral collectivity. Yet staying unintelligible in the grid of LGBT visibility does not guarantee a status of truly unruly subjects. The young queer participants who are rejecting the respectability politics of LGBT representations in my research may be dreaming up new futures for queer life in the country. But if they are articulating queerness in silence, absence, and invisibility instead of the grandiose coming-out ways of being queer, does their alternative politics accumulate to anti-normative ripples across the structure, or does it fall into political impasse without efficacy?

Belonging in a Post-socialist Nation

This thesis captures my efforts in contouring the shape of queer life in a post-socialist context through the dialectic of governmentality and subversion. As Vietnam lies at the nexus of multiple economic, political, and cultural hybridities, I strive to sift through the complex dynamics of coexisting and yet conflicting affects and their effects on shaping

queer subjectivity. On that ground, by borrowing the theoretical frameworks of black feminism in the U.S. and queer of color critique, my research expands the breadth of queer theory to the nonliberal realm of queer governance and subjectivities, as well as provincializes the politics of LGBT movements to the local cultural-moral terms.

The politics of respectability that I have witnessed in the workings of queer governance in the context of Vietnam bears a unique emphasis on the moral collective, different from the individuation process that constitutes the economically, socially, and sexually liberal queer. I have shown that shame, though considered a negative affect obscured in the current form of post-liberation gay selfhood in the U.S. (Halperin and Traub 2009), is productive of human dignity and social belonging in a society steeped in the socialist atmosphere of self-criticism and shared sufferings. My argument resonates with what Chua (2018) consider "the emotional power of sufferings" (68) which transforms the queer self in alignment with the collective call for social belonging. At the same time, the respectable queer is always already part of the collective via their teleological tie to the blood family. The family is cemented at the heart of the nation, whose wholeness has been resuscitated in the post-Renovation neo-Confucian value system of Vietnam. These moral anchors explain the partial recognition conceded to the non-normative bodies in the Vietnamese society, negotiated in the public view of their transgressive genders and sexualities. Hence my research contends with the overdetermined antagonism between the normative publics and the trans/queer ontology in Western epistemologies, instead imbuing in the queer bodies and affect the power to negotiate for acceptance not only within a counterpublic but among the heteronormative

mass as well (Hegarty 2022). My study of Vietnam thus demands that queer theory grapple with the question of governmentality and queer subjectification outside the neoliberal dominance and in the exceptional space of multiple contentious political and cultural-moral and affective logics.

At the same time, my thesis questions the imperative for queerness to find a place in the national collective and aspires to reimagine a different future for gender and sexual non-normativities in Vietnamese society. In the first place, I have demonstrated how the heterosexual gaze eclipses the lived experiences of the queer subjects in the production of LGBT representations on and off screen. While the technologies of such production processes allowed the decisions of the production team to override the self-narratives of the queer participants, the social and spatial practices in the filming studio sustained an essential hetero - queer divide that kept the queer subjects as the Other. As discussed above, the prominence of the heterosexual gaze limited the parameters of acceptable queerness to the kind of respectability articulated not only by class status but also by post-socialist morality. If belonging to the national collective bound queer life perennially to shame, filial piety, and heteronormative responsibilities, how can we rewrite the pathways of queer life that deviate from such assimilationism? In this work, I also zoom into the moments of failures on the filming set, when the queer participants went off script, derailing the carefully crafted heterosexual gaze that has elided their lived realities. Hà, who embodied shamelessness to expose multiple structures of harm they underwent, or Trà, who remained hopeless about their blood family and lived for queer kin instead, both evoked the possibilities of queer dis-belonging to the nation rooted from a place of

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negation and abjection. These possibilities are specific to the nonliberal context of Vietnam, but also resonate with the transcultural queer radical worldmaking (Halberstam 2011; Munoz 2009; Gopinath 2018). In other words, the ability to reinvent queer futures beyond the quagmire of (hetero)normativity comes from the rupture of queer affect of negativity invoked by local structures of nonliberal governance and the transnational politics of anti-assimilation shared by queer of color experiences. The next section shall explain how my thesis illuminates these possibilities through the localization of LGBT movements in the non-Western context like Vietnam.

Localization of LGBT Politics

The picture of LGBT politics in my research does not visualize an omnipotent force of Western vocabularies and imported agendas. Instead, my research unsettles the binary of import - export that seeks to explain local LGBT politics in terms of globalization or Westernization. Simultaneously, by seeking insights through the production and spectatorship of mainstream LGBT media in Vietnam, I displace the excessive predominance of local LGBT activists in shaping the politics of sexual minority, especially when many of them represent the higher-class youth educated in the West (for example, see Tsang 2022), the very respectable queers I am questioning in this thesis.

Although the picture of LGBT politics in Vietnam emerges in my thesis alongside Western terminologies and vocabulary, I maintain that the local scene of queer politics holds together divergent cultural logics that exceeds the frames of meaning set forth by Western LGBT politics. In this way, Vietnamese queer subjectivities come forth in the

"dubbing cultures" that neither parrots the West as the original points of queer identities nor reify the East as the locus of authentic sexual traditions (Boellstorff 2003). Specifically, by interacting the LGBT discourses with the local logics of moral and affective collectivity, the 'dubbing' queer cultures form new queer subject positions intelligible to Vietnamese historical and cultural context. For example, the acronym LGBT used in both "A Bright LGBT Life" and among the participants in my research bear multiple meanings beyond the framework of identity politics we are familiar with in the West. While LGBT is used as a set of identity categories to mark the modern individual, the queer participants in my work also reinvent it into a coded phrase, "*Làng Gốm Bát Tràng*" (Bat Trang Pottery Village), to refer to the queer communities without explicitly exposing themselves as queer. In other words, this playful twist on the acronym is employed by the queer individuals to maintain the invisibility and carve out (dis)belonging for the queer communities. This brings forth the nuanced meanings of "coming out," also a term used in "A Bright LGBT Life" and by some of my participants. On the one hand, the discourse of coming out works to governs the queer self as LGBT-identified individuals in the filming set. However, far from relying on the assertive 'coming out' speech to embody the liberated queer, most of my queer participants are concerned with cultivating mutual understandings about themselves with their collective networks through multimodal, fragmentary, and recursive communications. In short, the Western LGBT languages are dubbed by Vietnamese cultural logics of collective affect and sociality.

At the same time, my research suggests that such local 'dubbing' of Pride agendas should be viewed as a holistic, complicated process of negotiations among the state, the activist world, and what I see as the amorphous queer subject-positions on the fringe of the normative public. The scholarship on LGBT politics has embarked on the mission of explicating the processes of localizing LGBT movements in non-Western contexts. However, these scholars have exclusively focused on the efforts of the civil society in strategically adapting to the state's demands (Pham 2022; Tsang 2022) or nurturing locally relevant emotional and interpersonal cultures around doing LGBT rights (Chua 2018). In contrast, my thesis has demonstrated that the contentious forces at play both in queer media production and among the queer audiences may contradict and disrupt the field of policy advocacy by the activists. The production team of "A Bright LGBT Life," for example, is more concerned about the market demand for narratives of queer "differences," dubbed as the "sympathy-worthy" stories in the eyes of the presumably heteronormative public. In this way, they wrestle with the "positive framing" of LGBT images by many organizations working on LGBT rights in Vietnam, who actively push for "same as heterosexual people" as the representation of the queer community (Faludi 2016). Moreover, the queer participants in my interviews have expressed an ambivalence toward the legal items on these activists' agenda, including transgender rights and same-sex marriage. Chi, the queer participant from Đà Lạt we have met in previous chapters, expressed their nonchalant attitude toward the bill of transgender rights and the legalization of same-sex marriage:

"Maybe other people will want to have this option. For me, I have accepted myself so I don't feel the need to have some document acknowledging this. I am also okay with people calling me in any way they want, so [transgender rights] do not matter much. Marriage is just a formality that matters more when it comes to material possessions and children. I feel like I don't have much wealth, and I pay only a few thousands VND every month for tax, so I don't feel the urgency. I have seen so many cases when a legal marriage ends up tying up people who struggle to live together. So I think of it as a constraint, not a must."

While denying the significance of these legal developments in the realm of LGBT rights, Chi implicitly exposed the links between the institution of marriage and the reproduction of class hierarchy as well as the heteronormative futurity boiled down to "kid's stuff" (Edelman 2004). Complementing Chi's sentiment, Châu, another queer participant from Lâm Đồng province, dismissed same-sex marriage as an important right on the grounds of her lived realities as a queer woman living outside of the metropolitan hub:

"In Lâm Đồng, the politically complicated thing such as a trans person changing their legal name can be such a hassle. In Vietnam, women who hold hands walking on the streets would be mistaken as close friends only and do not get discriminated against anyway. So there is actually no need for official recognition."

As the feminine-embodied queer subjects can hide in plain sight under the hood of unintelligible female homosociality, Châu refused the politics of visibility embedded in

the LGBT rights movement for the "contingent invisibility" in favor of safe public space-claiming (Newton 2016). These examples illuminate how the queer subjects who hang at the margin of the classed, gendered, and homonormative LGBT politics can challenge the dominant frames of rights advanced by the activists.

Bringing my thesis to navigate the fraught translation and reconfiguration of LGBT rights politics within the media sector and among the queer people, I hope to shatter the linearized narrative of the LGBT movement being localized by the civil society alone. The process of localizing LGBT politics should instead be imagined as a contingent, unfolding, and contradicting playing field where the queer subjectivities informed by lived experiences of local inequalities complicate and disturb the activist agendas.

Feminist Queer Futures

But does the counterhegemonic energy of queerness actually transform the current politics of the LGBT movement, or even create anew a more radical queer politics? As my thesis reconciles with the exclusionary and even harmful effects of this localized version of LGBT politics, I have stumbled upon the alternative pathway of feminist queerness coalescing among the subjects who embody female homoeroticism or transfemininity in the absence of vocal coming-out politics. I do not deny the efficacy of the mainstream LGBT social movements in changing the relationship between queerness, as an assemblage of non-normative possibilities for gender embodiments and intimacies, and the Vietnamese nation. Rather, I attempt to unravel the knots among LGBT politics,

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developmental modernity, and the socialist cultural-moral net, which have allowed this local manifestation of Pride to bury a particular queer politics in the vicinity of feminist affect and sociality.

My positionality as the researcher has brought this thesis to highlight the feminist subjectivities, affect, and relationalities rendered illegible in the identity-based, respectable grid of LGBT politics in the nation. LGBT identifications are becoming gradually synonymous with modernity, hence legitimacy, in the developmental temporality and metronormative spatiality of Vietnam. I have demonstrated how the urban landscape of HCMC is ascribed the role of authenticating the rite of passage into LGBT identifications and consequentially the status of the modern citizen-subject. In contrast, the rural (*quê*) Southwest and its associated Lô Tô performances of transfemininity increasingly signify a primitive, outdated mode of gender non-normativity relegated to a pre-modernization past. Therefore, the imperative migration from rural to urban spaces implicitly in the development of legitimate LGBT identities betrays a structure of metronormativity (Halberstam 2005) that already privileges the physical mobility and urban space-claiming of gay men (Bondi and Peake 1988; Chua 2018), co-constituted by class hierarchy. As a result, the politics of refusal embodied by queer participants in my research gives shape to a feminist politics articulated in silence, invisibility, and negation.

In a way, my work calls for serious redress toward the gender divide that Chua (2018) also reports in the case of the LGBT movement in Myanmar. While Chua (2018) attributes the detachment of Burmese lesbians, tomboys, and transmen from the LGBT

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rights activism to the existing patriarchal and masculinist norms seeping from the wider society into the organization of the movement, I seek to locate alternative futures of queer politics within the rejectionist and negative proclivities of these excluded queers. The queer participants in my research recuperate their lived experiences of feminine embodiments, female homoeroticism, and queer kin with lower-class sensibilities, nearly ungraspable in the paradigm of stable LGBT identities. All of my participants maintain distance from the LGBT movement and communities to preserve their identity-free, perverse ways of living queer. In lieu of the mainstream LGBT representations in TV shows, they navigate other media routes such as grassroot social media content, Thai female love films, and even campy female figures in sports queered by their own spectatorship. In this process, they manage to occupy the gray zones of bê-đê, cultivate pleasures in unrespectable queer media, and imagine queer utopia from the everyday, antimonumental intimacies that flicker between love, friendship, and sisterhood (Munoz 2009; Halberstam 2011). On this basis, I do not read their separation from the Pride spectacle as merely disempowering, but instead see it similar to the way Newton (2016) and Sinnott (2009) contend that invisible female sexualities in the respective societies of Vietnam and Thailand are innovating new geographies and trajectories of queer community-building. Similarly, the queer participants in my research signify the co-constitutive politics of refusal and "shadow feminism" (Halberstam 2011), hinting at the possibility of queer politics circumventing the reproduction of patriarchal and heteronormative engines in Vietnam.

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The question about the political efficacy of such feminist queer politics is left unanswered for now. Minh, the queer participant who has turned away from the mainstream LGBT TV shows to engage in the queer fan cultures of Vietnamese female sports athletes, shared with me about her parents' ambiguous attitude toward her transgressive experiences of love:

"My parents do not say much. They just think of this as my passion. If I joke about going to see [the female athletes] in real life, my mom will joke back that I should beg my dad for money. I think my dad does not take this seriously. I don't know if they will react differently if I start to like 'real' women. But for now, they seem open and just laugh about this with me."

While the practices of queer spectatorship enable Minh to embody a form of transgressive intimacies ungovernable by the grid of LGBT identity politics, the apparent nonchalance of her parents also prolonged the narratives of female homoeroticism as an immature, fleeting fill-in before the order of heterosexual marriages and reproduction is restored (Ha 2020). Similar events of the same ambivalence I have encountered throughout my interactions with such feminist sentiment in this research urges further work to understand the quotidian, unmonumental, and silent ways these sentiments spiral into community-building and social transformation or might not. In this way, our research must meet the feminist politics of queer negation in its utopic invisibility by zooming away from the spectacular Pride parades, glamorous LGBT representations, or vocal policy advocacy. Instead, we breathe along with all the small ways queerness fleshes out

among friends, outside of the household, and in the body of the trans woman selling fruit

on the street.

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