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We're Here, We're Queer, Happy New Year:
Intergenerational LGBTQ Vietnamese American Family, Organizing,
and Sức Khỏe/Health

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

James Huynh

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

We're Here, We're Queer, Happy New Year:

Intergenerational LGBTQ Vietnamese American Family, Organizing,
and Sức Khỏe/Health

by

James Huynh

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Purnima Mankekar, Chair

My project focuses on the Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC), a community-based and volunteer-run 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded by an intergenerational group of LGBTQ and allied Vietnamese Americans. Through an ethnographic approach (semi-structured interviews and participant-observation), I explore how VROC members reconfigure and reimagine the concept of a Vietnamese family as the basis for their community organizing efforts to create an equitable Vietnamese diaspora. How might we view this familial mode of organizing as a potential protective health factor for these traditionally abject bodies? My work aims to examine how VROC as an organization fosters a culture of health through members' queering of family and kinship. Furthermore, I look at how participation in VROC impacts LGBTQ and allied Vietnamese Americans' sức khỏe (translated as health).

The thesis of James Huynh is approved.

Chandra L. Ford

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Purnima Mankekar, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

For the queer Vietnamese whose very existence is revolutionary

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Introduction

Background

When I first marched with the Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC) in the Tết (Vietnamese word for Lunar New Year) parade in 2018, I distinctly remember hearing other Vietnamese people, who were watching on the sidelines, shout out, “GO HOME!” In that moment, I felt immense shame and fear – shame for being queer and fear that we would be met with violence. It was VROC’s fourth time marching in this parade, so the other members of the group were not phased. One of our leaders turned towards those people and gleefully shouted into the megaphone, “We’re here! We’re queer! Happy New Year! Chúc mừng năm mới [Happy New Year in Vietnamese]!” With this loud declaration, his chant reminded me of how powerful and resilient the LGBTQ Vietnamese American community was and *is*.¹

Five years prior to that march, the statement, “LGBT is not part of Vietnamese culture” pierced through the Southern California Vietnamese community. These were the words of the Vietnamese American Federation of Southern California stated to a group of about five Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Vietnamese Americans in January 2013. This small group took on the formal name of Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC) later on that year (“History | VROC | Viet Rainbow of Orange County,” 2013). VROC’s first ever application to participate in the annual Tết Parade in Little Sài Gòn, California was rejected.

Through relentless community organizing, protesting, and city council meetings, VROC’s demands to be part of the parade were met. Initially, the group started off as a collective

¹ A note about terminology: Throughout my project, I occasionally use the word “queer” interchangeably with LGBTQ. For me, queer is an umbrella term for those who are sexual and gender minorities.

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of five members. Over the course of 5 years, VROC has become a volunteer-run 501(c)(3) organization that seeks a more equitable, safe, and unified Vietnamese diaspora where, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, all individuals are treated equally. VROC is an intergenerational organization complete with a parent advisory board and a youth advisory board. Members span a range of ages, sexual orientations, and gender identities.

Despite the progress that VROC has made in bringing visibility to their members' stories and existence, rampant LGBTQ discrimination and stigma continue to exist both within and outside of the Vietnamese American community. As a multiply marginalized group, LGBTQ Vietnamese Americans simultaneously experience racism, homophobia, transphobia, and restricting gender norms. According to the Center for American Progress, about 25% of LGBTQ Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) individuals experience psychological distress (Krehely, 2009). This rate is higher than any other racial/ethnic group and is more than four times higher than heterosexual AAPI individuals. Moreover, LGBTQ AAPI individuals experience a lower quality of life such as higher unemployment rates, homelessness, violence, and less social participation (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004).

By conducting ethnographic research with members of VROC, I examine the extent to which participation in this identity-based organization affects LGBTQ and allied Vietnamese American individuals' sức khỏe (translated as health in English). When I discuss sức khỏe, I touch upon constructs of my informants' perceived life satisfaction, physical health, psychological wellbeing, and social belonging.

Research Questions

My project aims to address several main questions:

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(1) What are the ways in which VROC members (re)define concepts of the Vietnamese family? Consequently, how might VROC members reconfigure notions and practices of family and kinship?

(2) Additionally, what are the benefits and drawbacks of using a family-oriented structure for VROC, as an organization, and for its members? Does the deployment of a family-based model reproduce and replicate heteropatriarchy?

(3) What are the possible social support functions of VROC's intergenerational, family-oriented structure?

(4) Finally, what are the possible impacts of participation in VROC on the sức khỏe (or health) of VROC members? In thinking about health, I find that the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of quality of life to be the most similar to the Vietnamese term sức khỏe. The WHO quality of life definition encompasses an "individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals" (Group, 1998, p. 551).

Central Argument

In this project, I argue that VROC's intergenerational family structure and grassroots organizing tactics serve as a case study that offers possible theoretical and practical interventions in queer of color studies, feminist studies on family and kinship, social network and quality of life studies. Specifically, I posit that the members of VROC reconfigure and queer the concept of the Vietnamese family in ways that morph biological and chosen kinship into an affective vehicle that can be used to drive political change. It is through the affective deployment and reimagining of the family that VROC was and is able to be incorporated into the Tết parade and into the "hearts of the Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese people". As such, I also argue that this

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reconfiguration of the family serves as an important intervention into public health studies of social networks and social support groups as protective health factors.

Situating VROC in a History of Queer Asian American and Vietnamese American Activism

VROC follows a long history of LGBTQ Vietnamese American activism in California. The Gay Vietnamese Alliance (GVA) started in 1991. GVA was founded by mostly gay Vietnamese men in San Jose, CA and Garden Grove, CA. Eventually, a group of lesbian and trans femme Vietnamese women from GVA decided to establish Ô-Moi (pronounced: Oh-moy) in 1993 in Southern California. For gay and lesbian Vietnamese people in California, GVA and Ô-Moi served as social and political spaces where members could support one another through experiences of racial, gendered, and sexual discrimination (nguyen & Nguyen, 2017).

Lesbian Vietnamese scholar Gina Masequesmay, who co-founded Ô-Moi, recounts in her interview in *Many Bridges, One River* how there has been a pattern of anti-LGBTQ discrimination at Tết parades in Vietnamese communities outside of Southern California (nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). When Sống Thật (translated as Live Truthfully) Radio started up in San Jose as the first queer Vietnamese radio program in 2004, the members wanted to march in the local Tết parade. Masequesmay shared, “We faced prejudice and discomfort... We also had a few people yelling boos or giving puzzling looks to the long names that had- “Đồng Tính, Luồng Tính, và Hoán Tính” [gay, bisexual, and transgender]- for our sign” (nguyen & Nguyen, 2017, p. 36). In January 2013, a group of five people, under the Partnership of Vietnamese American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) organizations, gathered to submit an application to participate in the Tết Parade of Little Sài Gòn. When their application was not

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accepted, the Vietnamese American Federation of Southern California commented, “LGBT is not part of Vietnamese culture.”

Using a multi-pronged approach, a group of Vietnamese American LGBT people and allies advocated and fought for their right to be included in the parade, but more importantly to change the hearts of the Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese community. They presented their stories to Vietnamese and mainstream media outlets and garnered support from local, state, and national organizations such as the ACLU, LAMBDA Legal, and Equality California. On February 10, 2013, over 250 Vietnamese LGBT people and allies came out to the sidelines of the parade to protest and to proudly raise their voices. Following this demonstration, members of the Vietnamese LGBT contingent came together to formally establish Viet Rainbow of Orange County, a community-based organization that works to empower our communities for a more equitable, empowered, safe, and unified Vietnamese diaspora.

Theoretical Frameworks

To ground my project, I will be drawing on theories of affect, queer liberalism, queer of color critique, feminist perspectives on family and kinship, and multiple minority stress. Using these theoretical frameworks, I aim to uncover the physical, mental, emotional, and affective ways in which VROC members negotiate their identities as LGBTQ Vietnamese Americans who aim to improve LGBTQ social inclusion in Little Sài Gòn. In the following section, I will briefly define the theoretical framework and discuss how it connects to this project.

Theories of Affect and Queer Affect

In the fifth grade, I started to view other masculine and men-presenting bodies as sexually attractive. In my mind, I would go through a cycle of thoughts, “Oh, this boy is very cute. Wait... why do I think that? That’s not normal, right? I can’t think of boys this way. But I

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do.” When I felt those internal reactions of shame and guilt, they elicited physiological responses of self-correcting my posture whenever it felt too feminine or feeling a tightness in my chest from having to hide a part of myself.

At that time, I had no language to name those gut reactions. This unnamed “intensity that exists prior to its capture by language” is what feminist anthropologist and cultural studies scholar Purnima Mankekar describes as affect (2015, p. 13). Following that definition, affect is distinct from emotion (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Labanyi, 2010; Massumi, 2015). Affect is considered to be the pre-cognitive and pre-linguistic reaction to a stimulus. Emotion is a conscious naming (therefore, linguistic) of what one feels in response to a stimulus. Additionally, Mankekar posits that affect does not simply exist in individual subjects. Instead, she follows Sara Ahmed’s theorization of affect and asserts that affect is produced through encounters between subjects, subjects and objects, and subjects and public cultures. In chapter 1, I provide a more extensive explanation of theories of affect and how they have grown and diverged from psychologist Silvan Tomkin’s founding definition of affect as the physiological manifestation of an emotion (see page 30) (Tomkins, 1962).

In thinking about queer bodies and subjects, I would like to expand upon the concept of affect by situating it in queer theory. Traditionally, queer theory focused its inquiries on the theorization of *queerness*, as it related directly to sexual minorities; however, it now encompasses discourse about bodies and topics that do not fit into stable, normative categories (Mikdash & Puar, 2016; Sullivan, 2003). By thinking about a kind of *queer affect*, I describe it as the pre-linguistic intensities, or gut reactions, that queer people and bodies experience as a result of occupying abject positions of gender and sexuality.

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Theories of affect, specifically notions of affective labor, inform how I analyze the relationships between VROC members, and between VROC and the Little Sài Gòn community. For the purposes of this project, I follow post-Marxist philosopher Michael Hardt's definition of affective labor:

Affective labor is better understood by beginning from what feminist analyses of "women's work" have called "labor in the bodily mode." Caring labor is certainly entirely immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower. (1999, p. 96).

I use affective labor to describe the different kinds of bodily care work that VROC members do for each other and for their community organizing efforts. From cooking food together, teaching each other about queer identities and issues, and providing one another emotional and physical social support, VROC members perform affective labor to create a sense of community and belonging. In chapter 2, I argue that the affects produced in VROC act as a foundation for members to construct an intergenerational, queer chosen family. Furthermore, VROC, as an organization, championed a motto of "changing hearts first, then minds later" when organizing to be accepted in the Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese community (Nguyen, 2018).

My usage of affective labor differs from sociologist Arlie Hochschild's emotional labor. Hochschild narrowly defines emotional labor as the paid work individual does, "which centrally involves trying to feel the right feeling for the job" and necessitates "evoking and suppressing feelings" (Beck, 2018; Hochschild, 1983). For example, a flight attendant must act nicer than usual, putting on a smile even if that means suppressing private emotions of anger or sadness. For Hochschild, emotional labor is about a worker's self-management and self-regulation of their

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emotions. Affective labor may be paid or unpaid and centers the interactions between people: how does they affect each other and how are they affected?

Thus, how can theories of affect help us better understand the ways VROC fostered health amongst its members? In addition, how do theories of affect help us understand the relationality between Little Sài Gòn's sociopolitical climate and VROC's community organizing efforts?

Queer Liberalism and Queer of Color Critique

In thinking about how the contemporary gay rights movement has been largely focused on incorporation into the state via marriage equality and equal rights, I take a look at what David Eng calls queer liberalism in his book, *The Feeling of Kinship*. Eng defines how queer liberalism in a post-identity age,

comes to demarcate more narrowly pragmatic gay and lesbian identity and identity politics, the economic interests of neoliberalism and whiteness, and liberal political norms of inclusion – including access to marriage, custody, inheritance, and service in the military. Today, “queer” and “rights” as well as “queer” and “marriage” no longer strike us as paradoxical terms of antithetical propositions (2010, p. xi).

While VROC's work can be seen as radical in many senses, how can a critique of queer liberalism challenge the organization's desires to be included in the Tết parade and similar state apparatuses?

In her foundational piece titled, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” Cathy Cohen argued for a queer of color critique framework that “understands [how] heteronormativity interacts with institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation to define us in numerous ways as marginal and as oppressed subjects” (Cohen, 1997, p. 446). Much of the mainstream

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literature that then pertained to gay and lesbian studies and history followed a classic single-oppression lens. Using a single-oppression lens model posits heteronormativity as the sole oppressor, thus creating a binary between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. The dichotomy that manifests from this model erases the multifaceted layers of discrimination and stigma that affect queer people of color, who often have much different needs from mainstream gays and lesbians. While mainstream gay politics err on the side of assimilation into heteronormative structures, Cohen frames queer of color politics as a movement to transform entire systems of oppression.

Throughout this project, I draw on queer of color critique to raise questions around the politically radical and transformative work that VROC does. What is the importance of having an organization that specifically centers an LGBT Vietnamese American identity? What does it mean for VROC members to be in a space that explicitly talks about the intersectional violence of heteronormative, patriarchal, racist systems in a Vietnamese context?

Feminist Perspectives on Family Formations and Kinship

Feminist perspectives on family and kinship shaped the research questions of this project and informed how I conducted my fieldwork with VROC. The more time that I spent with VROC, the more apparent family, as a central theme in the organization and members' lives, became. Many of my informants described VROC as a chosen family where they are able to find a sense of belonging, social support, care, and affection.

Within the context of a hegemonic heteropatriarchal narrative of family, the LGBTQ Vietnamese American subject occupies an abject position while simultaneously poses a threat to this familial model. From a feminist standpoint, the family remains a contested site of analysis, as it reproduces and enshrines patriarchal relationships (Chambers-Letson, 2018; Collier &

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Yanagisako, 1987; Eng, 2010; Reddy, 2005). However, the notion of a ‘chosen family’ - a family that is not necessarily blood-related, but rather created from forming non-biological kinship - has been popularized in the LGBTQ community (Chambers-Letson, 2018; Weston, 1991). Weston argues that “By reworking familiar symbolic materials in the context of nonprocreative relationships, lesbians and gay men in the United States have formulated a critique of kinship that contests assumptions about the bearing of biology, genetics, and heterosexual intercourse on the meaning of family in their own culture” (1991, p. 92).

Similarly, VROC members reconstitute motherhood, childhood, and sibling relationships in the context of non-biological relationships. That is, why do young, queer VROC members call the older, straight VROC women mom and what is the significance of that? What does it mean for these older, straight women to take on the role of mother for queer children who have no blood ties to them? What are the uses, benefits, and drawbacks of viewing VROC as a chosen family? Why do VROC members gravitate to notions of family and kinship when describing nonprocreative relationships?

Multiple Minority Stress Theory

This project seeks to link experiences of minoritization to health outcomes. These stressful experiences, or stressors, can lead to poor mental and physical health outcomes. However, they can also be an opportunity for individuals to grow and acquire resilience. For example, in response to an act of discrimination - being denied the right to march in the Têt parade - a group of LGBTQ Vietnamese Americans formed VROC. Within the field of stress studies, researchers in psychology have coined the term minority stress theory:

Minorities are exposed to excess stress related to a variety of stigma-related experiences that stem from their minority status: prejudice-related stressful life events such as being

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attacked or fired; everyday discrimination including microaggressions and slights; expectations of rejection regardless of actual discriminatory circumstances; the cognitive burden associated with negotiating outness; and the self-devaluation inherent to internalized homophobia (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015).

When it was first conceived in 2003 by Meyer, minority stress theory was used to explain poor mental health outcomes for LGBTQ people. Since then, the idea has expanded to include stress that an individual perceives and/or experiences from discrimination for being a racial, sexual, and/or gender minority (Balsam et al., 2011). As such, the concept of multiple minority stress has emerged to account for multiple, simultaneous forms of discrimination. Several studies have linked racial and sexual discrimination to higher levels of psychological distress for LGBTQ Asian Americans (Balsam et al., 2011; Chen & Tryon, 2012). What are common stressors that VROC members identify and how might those stressors be related to experiences of minoritization? Consequently, how do VROC members respond to experiences of minoritization? What are their coping strategies on an individual level and as an organization?

Methodology

As a queer Vietnamese American person, my use of ethnography allows for certain insights that draw on the experiences of my informants and my relationships with them. By employing this methodology, I bring forth my own positionality and feelings in relation to my informants. I used two methods in my ethnographic research: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. To ensure that my study met institutionally-set ethical standards and maintain practices of confidentiality and privacy to protect my participants, I acquired UCLA Institutional Review Board approval for this project. This project is approved as IRB #18-000667.

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Recruitment and Sampling

Like many other ethnographers and anthropologists, I used purposive sampling, a type of nonprobability sampling, to recruit participants for my study. According to anthropologist H. Russell Bernard, in purposive sampling researchers “decide the purpose you want informants (or communities) to serve, and you go out to find some” (Bernard, 2011, p. 145). Since my study specifically looks at VROC members, I knew that I had to interview only VROC members. From volunteering with the group for about half a year, I knew who I had to interview based on the insight I acquired during that time. Additionally, one of my informants, who I affectionately call anh² Hai, who is the founder of VROC, reviewed my initial list of participants to see if I needed to expand to others who could provide differing perspectives.

With anh Hai’s help, I recruited a sample that comprised of individuals with varying levels of current and past involvement in the organization and a wide variety of roles. VROC has an intergenerational structure: 1) the “youth” who are broadly defined as those ages 18-30, 2) the older brothers and sisters who are older than 30, and 3) the straight mothers. The mothers involved with VROC have biological LGBTQ children who are not active members in the organization. However, they act as maternal figures for the queer members in VROC. I purposively selected individuals from each of these generations in order to gain a diverse perspective on the organization. In total, I interviewed 15 VROC members while my participant observations included more than 30 individuals. For the interviews, I had a preset sample size of

² In Vietnamese, “anh” is a term of address that denotes the speaker’s older brother or a man-identifying friend who is older. With the members of VROC, we typically use Vietnamese terms of address when speaking to one another. Chapter 2 will elaborate on the affective orientations of using Vietnamese personal pronouns and their role in the organization’s reconstruction of a queer Vietnamese family.

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15 because at the time of my data collection, VROC only had 8 active members. I wanted to interview all the active members and include members who were no longer active with the organization.

At the beginning of every interview, I asked several demographic questions in order to capture the socioeconomic backgrounds of my interviewees (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary demographic characteristics
of Viet Rainbow of Orange County Members
(n=15)

	n	%
Ethnicity		
Vietnamese	12	80
Chinese-Vietnamese	3	20
Gender Identity		
Man	6	40
Woman	6	40
Trans Man	1	7
Gender Fluid	1	7
Does not care	1	7
Sexual Orientation		
Gay	9	60
Straight	4	27
Queer	1	7
Likes women	1	7
Age Group		
18 - 29	6	40
30 - 41	3	20
42 - 53	2	13
53 - 64	2	13
65 and older	2	13
Highest Educational Level		
High School Diploma	2	13
Associate's Degree	2	13
Bachelor's Degree	6	40
Master's Degree	4	27
Occupational Status		
Student	1	7

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Part-time employee	2	13
Full-time employee	8	53
Seeking employment	2	13
Retired	2	13
Years Involved in VROC		
1-2 years	1	7
2-3 years	1	7
> 3 years	13	87
Membership Status		
Active Member	9	60
Inactive Member	6	40

The majority of participants identified as ethnically Vietnamese and a minority identifying as mixed Chinese-Vietnamese. In terms of gender identities, 6 identified as cisgender men, 6 identified as cisgender women, 1 as a transgender man, 1 as gender fluid, and 1 who said they did not care what their gender identity was. In terms of sexual orientation, 9 identified as gay or lesbian, 4 as straight, 1 as queer, and 1 who said they like women but did not explicitly choose an identity. My sample is biased towards those with higher education since 75% have a bachelor's degree or higher. At the time when I interviewed the members, 9 participants were actively involved with VROC and 6 participants were not actively involved with VROC. Active involvement is defined as showing up to at least 50% of meetings and activities during my participant observation period.

Participant Observation: I noticed that VROC meetings and activities yielded moments with rich social interactions. I used participant observation to embed myself in VROC's organizational meetings and activities. In doing so, I observed how members navigated LGBTQ activism, their personal identities, and how these things affected their health. Originally, I intended for my participant observation period to last from July 2018 to October 2018. However, I extended this to the end of December 2018 in order to experience important organizational

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events. During these meetings and activities, I wrote short-hand notes about everyday interactions and conversations among members, issues that are of concern to VROC, and body language. After a meeting or at the end of the day, I would write a longer set of debrief notes to expand upon the short-hand ones. I used the debrief notes as a space for personal reflection, thinking critically about my role as researcher but also as that of an insider since I am part of the group. These notes were kept in a physical journal and on an encrypted, password-protected folder on my laptop.

Semi-Structured Interviews: The semi-structured interviews focused on themes of self-determination, collectivity, family, LGBTQ activism, and wellbeing. Each interview was audio recorded using my phone. Afterwards, I saved the audio recording in an encrypted, password-protected folder on my laptop. Three and a half interviews were conducted in Vietnamese while the rest were completed in English. As a native Vietnamese and English speaker, I did not require the use of any external interpreters. However, one of my informants, Roy, accompanied me when I interviewed three of the Vietnamese mothers on a sunny day in the summer. Roy, who first introduced me to VROC and identifies as a 27-year-old queer person, joined me because I had not yet felt comfortable conducting an entire interview in Vietnamese by myself. I also had never talked with the mothers one-on-one before, so Roy's presence provided all parties involved a level of familiarity and comfort.

Participants chose the location of the interview so that the setting would be most comfortable for them and of their choosing. Most of the participants chose their private homes, while a small number preferred to be interviewed at a local coffee shop. One of the interviews was done via Skype since the participant no longer lived in Southern California. At the end of

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each interview, I gave the participants a \$30 Target gift card to compensate them for their time.³

To protect the identity of my participants, I use only pseudonyms and where appropriate, have created composite stories to minimize traceability back to any specific individual.

Analysis: When I analyzed the interviews, I used both narrative analysis and content analysis reading practices. In my narrative analysis, I looked for moments and themes during the interviews where participants accessed larger, and at times, hegemonic narratives to support their responses. For example, when I ask the mothers in VROC about their personal definitions of family, I looked for specific quotes in the interview where they accessed narratives of family tied to broader notions of the Vietnamese and U.S. nation. But I also read these interviews for moments of narrative contradictions. To illustrate, one of my informants initially defined family as a group of people who are blood-related. Yet, a couple minutes later in that interview, they said family could also be a group of non-blood-related people who share close-knit ties.

I define narrative contradictions as when my informants' responses refute their previously stated hegemonic notions of race, racism, gender, sexuality, culture, and politics. What are the hegemonic and counter narratives that participants access? How might their internal thoughts differ from what they verbally articulate to me? With the latter question, this involves a kind of analysis that relies on my ethnographic field notes and it requires that I pair my narrative analyses with affect theory. Only then could I attempt to read between my informants' words.

To triangulate my findings, I used multiple sources: my field notes, calendars, Facebook events and messages (the primary communication medium for VROC), and the interviews. I corroborated information about events, members' reactions to activities and each other by noting

³ Gift cards were funded by a research grant from the UCLA Institute of American Cultures and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

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consistencies and contradictions in narratives and content across these different sources. More often than not, I reached saturation about VROC's organizational history, specific memories of tension and joy between members, and conceptions of family, kinship, and health.

In thinking about my own positionality as researcher, I also have to be aware of the narratives that I tap into during my analyses of the interviews, but also of the intimate moments in which I conversed with participants. What narratives are assumed between researcher and participant and how might those assumptions limit the conversation? Lesbian and gay studies anthropologist Kath Weston asserts, "Presumptions of a common frame of reference and shared identity can also complicate the anthropologist's task by leaving cultural notions implicit, making her work to get people to state, explain, and situate the obvious" (1991, p. 14). Thus, in my interviews I ask questions about my interviewees' identities and experiences even when I know that it might be common knowledge between the two of us. My interviewees usually laughed when I asked them what their ethnicity is because for them, it is quite obvious that they are Vietnamese, but as the researcher I need to ensure these obvious markers of identity, difference, and experiences were explicitly stated. As I asked these questions, I occasionally would find that some of the interviewees had identified as mixed-race, which is a topic that rarely enters conversation during VROC meetings and activities. Hence, by asking questions that might seem obvious, I was able to uncover information that could have been glossed over. Furthermore, I wanted to make certain that I was not relying on my assumptions about people's identities.

Reflecting on Positionalities

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As a gay, cisgender, Vietnamese American man and as the primary research instrument in this project, I needed to think continually about how my presence as a university-educated person conducting research on this community-based group affected our interpersonal dynamics.

I started volunteering with VROC since November 2017. By volunteering with the group, I built rapport with the members and started to get familiar with the norms and culture of the organization. After volunteering for six months, I approached VROC members about a potential research project. At a meeting, I presented my initial research question: How does participating in VROC impact members' mental health? I told the members that I wanted to interview them and take notes of my observations at meetings, events, and other organizational activities. The members responded with enthusiasm, noting that they were excited to see research being done about the LGBTQ Vietnamese American community. From gaining members' approval, I believed that VROC members acted as honestly and comfortably as they could with me throughout my data collection process. On the flip side, since I already had an existing relationship with VROC, I needed to be conscious and reflexive of the assumptions that I brought with me into my data collection. I may have taken for granted certain unwritten social rites (i.e. the subculture of calling some of the women "mom" or calling some of the older gay men "older brother" instead of "uncle") in VROC spaces that I needed to be acutely aware of as I analyzed my fieldwork notes and interview transcripts.

During the course of my participant observation, I became entrenched in the organizational workings of VROC. When I first started in July 2018, I was a new member. At the end of October, some of the VROC board members asked me to act as secretary and take notes during meetings. This was an easy transition because I had already been taking field notes for my thesis. Throughout this time, I found it difficult to separate my researcher self and my VROC

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self. With investments in my research and the organization, I used my secretary position to an advantage. I selfishly took detailed notes during minutes, while sharing an edited version to the rest of the organization. The edited versions excluded my observations of people's body language and my immediate interpretations of my observations. The shift from new member and researcher to board member and researcher meant that I had to reassess my new positionalities. As a board member of VROC, I had a stake in the organization. The status of a board member is more symbolic in nature: they exist to appease the legal requirements of a 501(c)(3) and they add to some structure to the organization. Beyond taking meeting minutes, I did not have more say than anyone else in the organization. VROC decisions are made through consensus voting, meaning that every single member present for a decision must agree.

In regard to how this impacted my interviews, participant-observation and analysis of my data, I risked being attached to VROC to the point where my analysis might only focus on the positives of the organization. I may have become blind to the negative aspects and moments. However, through a practice of journaling, as a method of reflexivity, I aimed to remind my researcher self and my board member self that VROC is not immune to internal issues. As a board member, I believe that I am motivated to be even more attuned to instances of internal strife amongst members. Although not an official rule, board members are expected to help guide community-building processes in VROC. In that capacity, tensions that arise are usually mediated by board members or between board members and non-board members.

In terms of my relationships with participants, I did not sense or observe any significant changes. By the time I became a board member, I had conducted 12/15 interviews. The last three interviews, which occurred in December (two months after I became secretary), were with inactive members. Due to their inactivity, my status as a board member did not impact our

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relationship or interview very much because these participants had not been heavily involved in VROC for a couple years now. If anything, they had expressed excitement that there was someone new taking on a leadership role in the organization.

In hindsight, one may think about my time in VROC as quite transactional – embedding myself with the organization to develop trust in order to conduct research. However, I have deeply personal motivations for joining VROC. VROC is the first and only space that I have been in that completely affirms me for all of the identities that I inhabit. It is a special space where I hear people speaking in Vietnamese about activism and advocacy for LGBTQ peoples.

This project is not merely for academic purposes, but one that is deeply personal and political. For me, research about minoritized and historically vulnerable populations has the power to produce positive change – institutional and systemic – for that community. While research has limits and is only one tool at our disposal in the struggle for social justice, I am intentional about using inductive methods as a way for VROC members to reflect on their activism and to think about how their work ties into the broader Vietnamese and LGBTQ communities. Due to these personal motivations and from building rapport with VROC members, I believe that my positionality helped improve the quality and rigor of my findings. It is my hope that this project begins to generate an archive of the lives of LGBTQ Vietnamese peoples who have been pushed to the margins within their own ethnic and sexual communities.

Outline of Thesis

In chapter 1, I situate my project within Asian American Studies and Public Health literatures that directly study LGBTQ Asian Americans. The figure of the queer Asian American has only recently become more visible in the fields of Asian American Studies and public health. Amy Sueyoshi's (2016) *Queer Asian American Historiography* paints a history in which the

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origins of the Asian American movement in the Long Sixties (approximately 1960-1975) was plagued with homophobia. As such, much of the Asian American canon up until the 2000s did not include queer Asian Americans, casting them aside as abject subjects. While there is now some literature on queer Asian Americans, much of it lies in the areas of cultural studies, literary studies, and media studies. Not much has been paid attention to how queer Asian Americans' intersectional minoritization affects their health; thus, there is still a need to study how psychological, social, and political factors affect this group's experiences and their quality of life.

For Chapter 2: (Re)Constructing a Queer Vietnamese family, I address my first two research questions about 1) how VROC members reconfigure and reimagine the Vietnamese family especially in the context of their community organizing, and 2) how the deployment of a family-based model in the organization has both benefits and drawbacks. I argue that VROC members imagine and practice alternative modes of family and kinship which are based on principles of radical queer Vietnamese American love and inclusion. They upend typical notions of hierarchy and patriarchy that normally serve as the basis for intergenerational Vietnamese families. Through a reconstitution of gendered maternal roles and the flattening of power relationships across age generations, VROC members create a Vietnamese family that both resists and reaffirms traditional modes of family and kinship.

Chapter 3: Impact of VROC on Sức Khỏe/Health addresses my other two research questions: 1) What are the possible social support functions of VROC's intergenerational, family-oriented structure? 2) What are the possible impacts of participation in VROC on members' sức khỏe/health? Through the reconstitution of the Vietnamese family, VROC members create a social network and social support environment that result in positive health

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benefits. This chapter elucidates the mechanisms and processes that explain why VROC members describe their quality of life as being better and happier since joining the organization. Secondly, members' direct and indirect involvement in political, social, and cultural organizing produces affectivities of collective and individual empowerment. By participating in grassroots organizing, VROC members spatially and affectively rearrange their environments in order to feel more secure, visible, included, and in power. They seek a sense of belonging in the Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese American community. From this, VROC members demonstrate both the sociopolitical and health impacts of community organizing.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review: Situating *We're Here, We're Queer, Happy New Year*

In this literature review, I situate my project within multiple disciplines: minority stress studies, affect studies, queer of color cultural studies, and feminist perspectives on family and kinship. Rather than solely review works that attend to Vietnamese Americans, I will look at the broader category of LGBTQ Asian American subjects. While I acknowledge that Asian Americans comprise a heterogenous population, looking at Asian American subjects is crucial to this project because of the ways in which Vietnamese Americans are racialized and subsumed into Asian America within a U.S. context.

This chapter begins by historicizing the scholarship on queer Asian Americans. By providing this context, I trace how Asian American Studies and public health research have deepened our understanding of the social formations of LGBTQ Asian Americans. From there, I link the ways queer Asian Americans are racialized, gendered, and sexualized with minority stress studies. In doing so, I discuss how minority stress studies could explain the physical and mental tolls that VROC members endure from living as minoritized people. Then, I bring in feminist and queer of color perspectives on family and kinship to provide a framework to understand how VROC members socially reproduce and reconstitute the family to foster a culture of health.

A Brief Genealogy on the Study of Queer Asian Americans

To understand where VROC fits into the sociopolitical landscape of Asian American studies scholarship, I briefly trace the history of queer Asian American communities. Amy Sueyoshi's (2016) "Queer Asian American Historiography" is quick to point out that "queerness has only just become visible in Asian American studies" (p. 267). Homophobia that existed during the Long Sixties of the Asian American Movement explains why earlier scholarship did

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not speak much about queerness. In the field of queer studies, there is a dearth of an Asian American presence within the literature, which reflects a larger cultural practice of marginalizing Asian Americans within the queer community. The marginalization in both fields' earlier scholarship mirrors the multiple forms of discrimination that queer Asian Americans experience.

Alice Y. Hom and David Eng's (1998) *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* and Russell Leong's (1996) *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* were some of the first anthologies that brought together interdisciplinary perspectives on the queer Asian American experience. These texts argued that being queer in 1990's Asian America often meant dealing with complex identities of race, gender, and sexuality that were not yet widely understood by their heterosexual peers. They argued that understanding racial categories must also involve an analysis of gender, class, and sexuality. Together, these texts foreground multifaceted oppression, identity politics, and social justice movements. How do these early instances of queer Asian American activism and scholarship impact contemporary community organizations such as VROC?

However, in these anthologies, the significance of place is often missing. For this project, Little Sài Gòn as a place is inextricably linked with the formation of VROC. Little Sài Gòn in Orange County, California is home to the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam (Turley, 2009). However, VROC is not the only organization that formed because of its physical proximity to a high concentration of co-ethnic people.

For the LGBTQ Asian American community, the formation of A/PLG (Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays) in Los Angeles in the late 1980s marked an important moment (Wat, 2002). It offered members a space to transform how they looked at their own racial and sexual identities. In its early stages, the organization held meetings that allowed for LGBTQ Asian

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Americans to form a sense of community in one concentrated place. Unfortunately, A/PLG was steeped in sexual and racial politics that ultimately pushed the organization away from its original purpose of providing a space for LGBTQ Asian Americans to congregate. Instead, the organization became the ground for White man-Asian man couplings, which were deemed natural and the most desirable kind of partnership (Wat, 2002). Under these Orientalist logics, the queer Asian American communities had to contend with internalized and institutional racism. Orientalism is a colonial strategy and a set of beliefs and discourses that are used to homogenize the people and cultures of the East (i.e., Asian countries and the Middle East) as an inferior, exotic “other”, while also valorizing the West (i.e., the United States and Europe) as strong, rational, and savior to backwards societies (Said, 1979).

In thinking about place, Little Sài Gòn physically is nestled within the larger, affluent predominantly White communities of Orange County. Furthermore, VROC is one of few non-White LGBTQ nonprofits in Orange County; meaning, the organization sometimes receives collaboration requests from White-centric LGBTQ organizations. What are the roles of racism and Orientalism in shaping the power dynamics between VROC and its LGBTQ partner organizations? How do VROC’s members contend with Orientalist logics in their personal, professional, and activist lives?

What’s so stressful about being LGBTQ and Vietnamese American? A Look into Minority Stress Studies

This section of the chapter illuminates how queer Asian Americans are sexualized, racialized, and colonized in gay and transnational spaces that engender hegemonic white masculinity. Minority stress studies helps explain the physical and mental health impacts of these historical and contemporary processes of minoritization.

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Foreignness/Racialization

Queer Asian Americans face not only an imposed feminization upon their bodies but also a racialization that confers upon them perpetual foreignness that furthers their paradoxical status of being desexualized and hypersexualized in queer communities. Importantly, the ways in which queer Asian Americans are sexualized occurs along gendered axes. For example, in gay male communities, the "no femmes" (meaning: no feminine acting men) message can be seen on gay online dating websites. Additionally, many dating profiles will also feature the following line, "Sorry, not into Asians. No offense. Just a preference" (Nguyen, p. 196). While queer Asian men are desexualized, queer Asian women generally occupy hypersexualized positions. A pervasive discourse in the LGBTQ community is that preferences are free from social and political malintent. For the queer Asian Americans, this sentiment is grotesquely mistaken.

To understand the alienation of queer Asian Americans that occurs in U.S. gay communities, queer performance studies scholar Eng Beng Lim proposes that it is rooted in the colonial dyad of the white man/brown boy (2014). In his book *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, Lim interchangeably uses brown boy and native boy in his book to represent the indigenous Indonesian male who has been infantilized and Orientalized by Western colonizers. The racial conjuring that appears in Indonesia is relevant to U.S. gay communities.

C. Winter Han's interviews with queer Asian Americans and his research from online dating websites such as Grindr digs beneath the surface of the usual discourse of "preferences as not racist" that was mentioned earlier. One of Han's interviewees responded to this messaging with, "I feel more like a minority in the gay community than I do in the Asian community because I'm gay" (Han, p. 95). That sentiment is taken a step further for some queer Asian Americans who wish to assimilate into whiteness or to be in a romantic partnership with another

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White person. Following Orientalist logics, White-Asian queer partnerships have given rise to the term: rice queen. Rice queen is a term in the gay community that generally denotes a white man who fetishizes and desires the gay Asian male body. They are "men who specifically prefer more feminine men, [that] many gay Asian American men find it easier to perform a submissive role in order to maximize their sexual capital" (Han, p. 144). While this scholarship has focused on gay Asian men, how might experiences of racialization and sexualization differ for queer Asian women and queer gender-nonconforming Asians? Since VROC members span a range of gender identities, what are their experiences in navigating their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities in the context of homonormative sexual politics?

Anti-LGBTQ Discrimination for Asian Americans

The racialization and sexualization of queer Asian Americans have violent implications in regard to anti-LGBTQ discrimination. Despite past research on bullying of LGBT students, a study of 35 gay Asian American men found that they utilize the model minority stereotype to evade harassment (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016). Ocampo and Soodjinda discuss the roles that bullying, harassment, and identity crises play in the educational experiences of gay Asian American men. They note that "being gay adds an additional variable of stress, as many gay Asian Americans struggle with finding compatibility between their sexual and ethnic identity" (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016, p. 483).

Of note is that the study found that participants "rechanneled their parents' attention to their academic achievements" thereby employing education as a dual-layered protective factor against stress (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016, p. 493). This finding is fascinating because it may explain why my sample of VROC participants tended to have higher levels of educational attainment. In fact, all of the LGBTQ youth in my sample have at least a bachelor's degree. The

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only participants without a bachelor's degree are the heterosexual VROC mothers who immigrated to the US as refugees. How does the pursuit of educational achievement or the lack of it impact the health of my informants? In what ways do their academic degrees afford them material and psychic resources to buttress racism, homophobia, and gender violence?

Although Ocampo and Soodjinda noted that the negotiation and contestation of identities added a layer of stress for participants, their study did not link minority stress to health implications. Chen and Tryon's (2012) "Dual Minority Stress and Asian American Gay Men's Psychological Distress" study is one of the first public health studies to focus on the gay Asian American male population. They measure psychological distress in gay Asian American men by using an additive model. The additive model, a statistical method, is used in conjunction with the minority stress model whereby the stress perceived from being a racial minority is added to the stress perceived from being a sexual minority. Chen and Tryon hypothesized that both racial minority stress and sexual minority stress "would be directly and uniquely associated with lower self-esteem and higher psychological distress" (Chen & Tryon, 2012). Instead, the results showed that the added stress from being a racial/ethnic minority did not increase levels of psychological distress. Most of the gay Asian American men's psychological distress came from their experiences as a sexual minority.

In contrast to the Chen and Tryon study, Wilson and Yoshikawa's 2004 study seeks to frame the discrimination that Asian Pacific Islander gay men face through an intersectional lens. Wilson and Yoshikawa used semi-structured interviews methods to understand the relationship between social discrimination and HIV risk amongst API gay men. Their findings suggested that API gay men experienced a wide variety of discrimination including homophobia and anti-immigrant discrimination. The results show that API gay men face the most discrimination from

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the gay community (27% of discrimination episodes) as opposed to the Asian community (9% of discrimination episodes) (Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004, p. 73). From the gay community, API gay men faced several different types of discrimination, with racism being the highest as opposed to anti-immigrant discrimination. This illustrates the complexities of the intersectionality of racism and homophobia.

While the Chen and Tryon study separated racial minority identity and sexual minority identity into distinct categories, I wonder if VROC members also think about themselves in clearly demarcated ways. Do VROC members attribute certain stressors to one part of their identity? Or would the thought of separating their Vietnamese- and Asian-ness from their queerness be unthinkable? In line with queer of color critique theorists and the Wilson and Yoshikawa study, I would argue in favor of the latter. Heteronormativity, racism, and sexism are mutually constructed and reinforcing of one another.

Feminist and Queer of Color Perspectives on Family and Kinship

In the face of anti-LGBTQ discrimination, VROC members banded together and formed an intergenerational, queer Vietnamese family as the core model for their non-profit organization. However, the particular kind of family that VROC embodies defies conventional notions of family and kinship. Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier argue that families should not be strictly defined to those of genetically, blood-related relations nor should one be conflated with the other (1987). Their anthology, *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* is a foundational text for the study of kinship theory using feminist epistemologies. Following that argument, Kath Weston's (1991) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* ethnographically illustrates how gay and lesbian chosen families can reproduce and replicate hierarchy and heteropatriarchy. However, an important argument that she makes, which deeply

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informs this project, is “that gay families could not be understood apart from the families in which lesbians and gay men had grown up... it became evident that discourse on gay kinship defines gay families vis-a-vis another type of family known as "straight," "biological," or "blood"-terms that many gay people applied to their families of origin” (Weston, 1991, p. 5). As I argue in chapter 2, the biological or blood-related family continues to be the reference category for many of my informants. My informants tended to define chosen family and VROC in opposition and/or in addition to their blood-related families.

Additionally, in chapter 2, I focus on the crucial role of the straight Vietnamese mothers within VROC, who serve as sources of support for the queer youth and older brothers and sisters. Rod Ferguson states in his groundbreaking *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, “as queer of color critique challenges ideologies of discreteness [that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations], it attempts to disturb the idea that racial and national formations are obviously disconnected” (2004, p. 4). Following this framework, I analyze the interactions between VROC mothers and queer youth by thinking about how Vietnamese American motherhood and queer youth life intersect with U.S. and Vietnam nation-building projects.

In Joshua Chambers-Letson’s (2018) *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, he approaches motherhood from a performance lens, arguing that both biological mothers and queer mothers can and perhaps should sit together at the same table. Viewing motherhood as a performance helps enrich my analysis of the interactions between the VROC mothers and other members. How does this performance of motherhood benefit the organization? What are the physical and psychic costs of doing so for the mothers, and how does that translate to impacts on health?

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Theories of Affect – Distinguishing Affect from Emotions

Throughout the thesis, I discuss members relationships to each other and VROC's activism – one that could be perceived as a queer liberal movement – by drawing on constructs of affect, affective labor, affective modulation, and emotions to illustrate the radical potential impacts of VROC's work. My usage of affect differs from how psychologist Silvan Tomkins, one of the founding affect theorists, conceptualizes affect. Tomkins defines affect as the biological manifestation of emotion wherein the face expresses a feeling. The affect of happiness is typically manifested as a smile on the face (Tomkins, 1962). This definition of affect, which is sometimes used interchangeably with emotion, is used commonly in the psychology and mental health literature (Demos, 2019; Olson, McKenzie, & Patulny, 2017; Santos et al., 2013).

Theorizations and understandings of affect remain contested amongst scholars who study it (Cuddon, Habib, & Birchwood, 2013). In contrast to Tomkins' definition, cultural studies scholars like Mankekar argue that 1) affect is distinct from emotion, and 2) affect is socially consequential and not solely an innate, biological reaction.

Firstly, emotions are linguistic, meaning that they are the feelings that are named and given language to (Labanyi, 2010; Lutz & White, 1986; Mankekar, 2015). Following this logic, emotions are the retrospective and conscious recognition of affect. Affect and emotion exist along a continuum, with each one occupying “different points... going from body to mind” (Labanyi, 2010, p. 224). To illustrate this, Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, revisits a common example in the psychology literature on emotions: a child running away from a bear. She writes:

The child sees the bear and is afraid. The child runs away... Functionalist models of emotion, which draw on evolutionary theory, might say that fear has a function: to protect

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the child from danger, to allow survival... Why is the child afraid of the bear? This decision is not necessarily made by her, and it might not even be dependent on past experiences. This could be a ‘first time’ encounter, and the child still runs for it... What does she see when she sees the bear? We have an image of the bear as an animal *to be feared* [author’s emphasis], as an image that is shaped by cultural histories and memories... This knowledge is bodily, certainly: the child might not need time to think before she runs for it. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 7).

In this short narrative, the child’s bodily response to running away is what I would call the affective response. In that ephemeral moment before the child becomes conscious of fear, that is affect. When the child consciously knows she is afraid, that is emotion.

Secondly, Mankekar also argues that affect does not innately exist or arise in individual people; it is socially consequential. Instead, she and Sara Ahmed both argue that affects are produced through interactions between people, between people and objects, or even between people and social phenomena such as patriarchy, homophobia, and racism. Going back to the story of the child and the bear, Ahmed points out that the fear of the bear is shaped by cultural histories and memories. Contact between bears and humans shape a historical and learned fear of the bear. Ahmed intervenes in the psychology understanding of affect by critiquing the idea that fear, and other affects, are innately and purely biological. With this understanding, the production of affects is relational rather than causal. As Ahmed writes, “it is not just that we might have an impression of bears, but ‘this bear’ also makes an impression, and leaves an impression” (2004, p. 8).

By distinguishing emotion from affect, we can be more specific in understanding how racism, heterosexism, nationalism, and patriarchy shape people’s gut reactions and feelings

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toward the social stimuli around them. Regarding kinds of stimuli, in this project, I focus mainly on interpersonal conversations and mass media.

From a critique of queer liberalism perspective, as David L. Eng discusses in his book *The Feeling of Kinship*, VROC's desire to be in the Lunar New Year parade may be perceived as falling under "liberal political norms of inclusion – including access to marriage, custody, inheritance, and service in the military" (2010, p. xi). In an era of queer liberalism, Eng posits that gay and lesbian identity and identity politics become "increasingly unmoored from its theoretical potentials and possibilities" and instead "demarcate[s] more narrowly pragmatic interests and neoliberalism and whiteness" (2010, p. xi). According to this lens, VROC's origins could be perceived as being steeped in assimilationist politics in which queer Vietnamese Americans are demanding to be part of an existing heteronormative institution (the Lunar New Year Parade), rather than challenging it.

Yet, their fight to feel included does not necessarily indicate a blind desire to be assimilated. Instead, VROC members intentionally deploy what Brian Massumi calls affective modulation, which "requires in some ways a performative theatrical or aesthetic approach to politics" that modify the psychic and emotional registers of the intended audience (2015, p. 34).

When members were denied the right to march in the Tết parade they sought to "change the hearts of the Little Sài Gòn community" (nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). Rather than employing strategies of logic or attempts to change people's minds with reasoning, VROC members engaged in storytelling as their primary strategy. The mothers of VROC shared their stories of struggling and learning to accept their queer children. The queer members of VROC talked about their coming out experiences and growing up and being queer in Little Sài Gòn. From appearing on popular Vietnamese American talk shows and radio stations to speaking at Westminster City

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Council meetings, VROC tapped into their affective registers of the local Vietnamese community. To put it simply, the organization “changed hearts” by manipulating and producing a range of affects on a community-wide level.

Anh⁴ Tu, one of the older gay men in the group and co-founder of the Gay Vietnamese Alliance (VROC’s predecessor), noted that VROC’s intergenerational membership provided a key strength:

Because the community see that our organization, we have not just like these kids who are Americanized, and who don't have maybe Vietnamese values or don't know anything, but they can see, "Oh there are children and there are parents who are supporting the children.”

This multipronged approach illustrated to the community that LGBTQ Vietnamese people are indeed a part of Vietnamese culture. By affectively modulating the sociopolitical and cultural environment of Little Sài Gòn, VROC members afforded themselves a sense of belonging vis-a-vis self-determination. It is through that struggle for self-determination along with the successes of intergenerational organizing and the strong support network amongst members that afford VROC individuals an environment in which they feel better in terms of their sức khỏe.

Conclusion

The feminist, queer of color, public health, affect studies, and Asian American studies scholarship that I reviewed have been instrumental in shaping *We’re Here, We’re Queer, Happy*

⁴ I refer to Tu as anh Tu, where I use anh, the Vietnamese pronoun for older brother. When Roy first took me to a VROC event, he explicitly told me to never to the older gay men as bác, chú or ông which are the Vietnamese equivalents to mister and are commonly used for men as old or older than one’s parents. Instead, a relational bond of brotherhood and sisterhood is created among the younger and older queer people in VROC.

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New Year! These works have allowed me to conceive a project that intervenes in the literature by bridging feminist and ethnic studies theoretical frameworks with public health practice and research. In public health, the social ecological model positions the family as that which encompasses the individual but is circumscribed by the community (e.g., neighborhoods, schools, workplaces) (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015). However, feminist perspectives on family and kinship help us complicate that model by interrogating the family as a social construction that is permeable to labor, sexuality, the role of the state, and geopolitics. Thus, the family and its social construction can become sites of public health intervention. In the following chapters, I discuss the ways in which VROC members queer symbolic and affective ties of family and kinship in order to create an environment that fosters holistic health and combats multiple minority stress.

2. (RE)CONSTRUCTING A QUEER VIETNAMESE FAMILY

Chapter 2: (Re)Constructing a Queer Vietnamese Family

I think family for queer people is very unique. And it's very difficult to define. – Roy

I mean, that's just weird though. Like, it's so hard to define family. – Nancy

Introduction

I first met Roy in 2017 when we worked together at an AIDS service organization in the greater Los Angeles area. Roy, who is 27 years old, identifies as gender fluid and queer.

Whenever he walked into the office, he sported a patterned button-up short-sleeve shirt with flowy slacks. For Roy, the long hallway leading to my office was not just any hallway. It was a fashion runway that he, with a pink leather jacket thrown over the shoulders, would strut down and stop to pose dramatically in front of my door.

While playing video games one day in the office, he started telling me about the Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC), a queer Vietnamese organization that he helped found in 2014. Roy told me that VROC was having a Thanksgiving party on November 18, 2017. He invited me to come out to just meet everyone. Having just settled back in Southern California for a year, I thought that it would be nice to start making some queer Vietnamese friends. I drove down to Garden Grove, the city that comprises one-third of the Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese community. It was about 7 PM when I had arrived in front of the address that Roy gave me. I text messaged Roy to ask if he was at the party and to my dismay, he said he was running 30 minutes late. Being the nervous and awkward person that I am, I told Roy that I would just wait in the car until he arrives because I did not know anyone else at the party. I was too afraid to walk into someone's house and meet an entire group of strangers. In all caps, Roy texted back, "JUST GO IN."

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I took a deep breath, walked through the front yard, slipped off my shoes, and opened the unlocked door. Immediately, I was greeted by a very energetic and kind Vietnamese man, who appeared to be in his early 30's. With his black-rimmed glasses, he introduced himself as Hai, but told me that I could call him "anh Hai". Anh is the Vietnamese pronoun/term of address for one's older brother or a man-identifying person who is older. I later found out that anh Hai was one of the co-founders of VROC. He led me into the dining room, where I met more than 15 other older gay Vietnamese men, ranging from their 20s to 50s. The men were sitting all along the perimeter of the room. Raucous laughter and juicy gossip filled the air. A few of the men, huddled by the piano in the corner, enthusiastically sang classic Vietnamese songs which I had recognized from my childhood. In the middle of the dining room, an entire Vietnamese feast decorated the long, rectangular, wooden table. I immediately spotted some of my favorite foods: bánh bèo (small flat rice flour cakes with grounded shrimp sprinkled on top), cơm chiên (fried rice), and Vietnamese chicken curry. As I piled some food onto a paper plate, I remembered thinking, "Wow, I have never been around this many queer Vietnamese people before! This is so strange, but oddly welcoming and nice." When I interviewed VROC members later on, I learned that many of them also felt this emotional state of perplexity and validation when recounting their first interactions with the organization.

Not only did that moment stand out, but one of the things that I immediately noticed was how multiple people, including anh Hai, Roy, and some of the older gay men called some of the Vietnamese women present "mẹ", which means mother in Vietnamese. Depending on the region a Vietnamese speaker grew up in, "má" can be used refer to mothers as well. With a perturbed look on my face, I wondered if most people in VROC had been related by blood to each other.

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After hearing me speak in my Huế⁵ accent, anh Hai excitedly grabbed a Vietnamese woman who he called “mẹ Kim” and said, “Look! He’s from Huế too!” Mẹ (or Mama) Kim, a light-skinned bright-faced woman in her mid-40s, expressed her joy at meeting another Vietnamese person who could speak with the Huế accent. She scooped me a bowl of warm, aromatic phở and instructed me to be careful of the hot broth. Letting my curiosity get the best of me, I asked Mama Kim and anh Hai if they are related. The two looked at each other in bewilderment and burst into laughter. Anh Hai said, “Oh no em, we all call the moms here mẹ. Even though we’re not blood-related, they are the mothers of their own queer children, but also to all the queer youth and older brothers in VROC.”

With that opening scene in mind, as I began to get more involved with the organization, I found it fascinating how VROC members constructed and imagined their own intergenerational, queer Vietnamese family. Despite the organization being a formalized non-profit, I repeatedly noticed how informal the meetings were and the centrality of ideas of family and kinship played to the organization’s mission to create a safe and affirming environment for queer Vietnamese people.

Research Questions and Central Argument

In this chapter, I address my two research questions about 1) how VROC members reconfigure and reimagine the Vietnamese family especially in the context of their community organizing; and 2) how the deployment of a family-based model in the organization has both

⁵ Huế is a city in the central region of Vietnam. Vietnamese speakers from this region are described as having a thick accent that is clearly recognizable by Vietnamese speakers from the Northern and Southern regions of the country. Many Vietnamese diasporic people in Southern California came from Sài Gòn, so they speak with a Southern accent, which is sometimes regarded as “more proper” than the Huế accent.

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benefits and drawbacks. I argue that VROC members imagine and practice alternative modes of family and kinship, which are based on principles of radical queer of Vietnamese American love and inclusion. They challenge typical notions of hierarchy and patriarchy that normally serve as the basis for intergenerational Vietnamese families. Through a reconstitution of gendered maternal roles and the flattening of power relationships across age generations, VROC members create a Vietnamese family that both resists and reaffirms traditional modes of family and kinship. Furthermore, VROC's (re)construction of a queer Vietnamese family disrupts discourses of US and Vietnamese nationalism, thereby providing counternarratives to dominant Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese American politics.

For the purposes of this argument, I define traditional notions of family and kinship using both a United States lens and a Vietnamese one. Since VROC members occupy a space where US cultural forces and Vietnamese cultural forces intertwine, this chapter must attend to both of those things. From a US social and legal standpoint, the nuclear biological, heteronormative family is heralded as the gold standard. Before the passing of marriage equality by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015, same-sex marriages were illegal and were afforded little to no legal protections. The rhetoric surrounding the marriage equality debates focused on cultural, social, biological, and religious justifications for what constitutes a "married couple" conventionally defined as that between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman. Marriage, a hallmark institution of heteropatriarchy, then becomes a marker for the family, which is implicated and permeable to the political economy, globalization, war, and labor.

For example, we see this encoded in the Immigration Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart Cellar Act), particularly the Family Reunification section. With the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965, the United States abolished its national-origins quota system and

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opened its border to reunite families and meet the labor market demand for skilled labor (Zhou & Ocampo, 2016, p. 102). More than two-thirds of contemporary Asian immigrants were family-sponsored migrants. By enshrining a nuclear, heteronormative family as the basis for immigration standards, the U.S. is able to shape who can enter its borders (see figure 1) (Kim, 1996; Zhou & Ocampo, 2016). In this example, we see how notions of family and kinship are tied directly to the juridical domain.

CHART ONE PREFERENCE SYSTEM, IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1965

- (1) First preference: Unmarried sons and daughters of U.S. citizens (not more than 20%)
- (2) Second preference: Spouse and unmarried sons and daughters of an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence (20% plus any not required for first preference).
- (3) Third preference: Members of the professions and scientists and artists of exceptional ability (not more than 10%).
- (4) Fourth preference: Married sons and daughters of U.S. citizens (10% plus any not required for first three preferences).
- (5) Fifth preference: Brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens (24% plus any not required for first four preferences).
- (6) Sixth preference: Skilled and unskilled workers in occupations for which labor is in short supply in U.S. (not more than 10%).
- (7) Seventh preference: Refugees to whom conditional entry or adjustment of status may be granted (not more than 6%).
- (8) Nonpreference: Any applicant not entitled to one of the above preferences (any numbers not required for preference applicants).

SOURCE: Keely, 1971, p. 160

Figure 1. Immigration Act of 1965 Preference System referenced in (Kim, 1996).

On the other hand, the traditional Vietnamese family follows biological heteronormativity but departs from the US in various ways. The family is not limited to the nuclear family. Family is instead conceptualized as an entire extended family including uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins. For instance, grandparents play an important role as authoritative figures who have a direct hand in childrearing. As such, it is not uncommon for there to be more than two generations living in one household (Galanti, 2000). As an example, I

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heard multiple times across my interviews the parents usually said, “Don’t tell your grandpa or grandma” when their child came out as LGBTQ. Migration to the United States also has impacted the gendered division of labor in Vietnamese American families (Kibria, 1990). Vietnamese American immigrant women must also play a role in economically supporting their families as opposed to staying at home, tending to housework and the social reproduction of fully-functioning adults (Kibria, 1990; Zhou & Ocampo, 2016).

While I state that there are differences between US notions of family and kinship compared to Vietnamese ones, I want to be careful with drawing these distinctions. In no way do I want to reinforce Orientalist logics of incommensurable cultural difference between the East and the West. Rather, I point out these larger narratives of family and kinship as reflections of their permeability to the US nation and the Vietnamese nation. These two nation-building projects rely on particular social reproductions of the family to advance their own political agendas. For it is literal biological and social reproduction of human beings, labor that is taken on mostly by women, that sustain economic and political systems (Chambers-Letson, 2018; Collier & Yanagisako, 1987; Federici, 2012).

In thinking about how queer people use kinship terminologies for themselves, Kath Weston’s (1991) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* offers an ethnographic study of lesbians and gay men in San Francisco who formed their own gay families as the antithesis to biological, blood-related families. Importantly, Weston’s work shows us that lesbians and gay men extend kinship beyond notions of procreation and nonbiological ties that are patterned after a biological model such as adoption. Instead, she illustrates how kinship terminology is used to describe a nonterritorial understanding of community “that rest[s] on a sense of belonging with one’s “own kind” [which] have numerous antecedents in the United States; those most relevant

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to a gay context include such unlikely compatriots as religion and the tavern” (Weston, 1991, p. 125). Terminologies and notions of family and kinship become the avenue for which VROC members express affection, care, frustration, pettiness, and support in this identity-based community.

2.1 Conceptions of Family and Kinship as told by Informants

Affectivity and Orientations of Vietnamese Personal Pronouns

“Cô nghĩ bố mẹ cũng thương tụi con always.” [I, lady, think your mom and dad also love you children always.] These were the words that Mama Huyền, the oldest of the four VROC mothers, said to August, a 25-year old gay Vietnamese man who had come to his very first VROC meeting. Mama Huyền, who is nearly 70 years old, sported a short haircut and donned dark red lipstick. She wore shoulder pads beneath her shirt and exerted a strong and healthy presence. It was 11:20am on Sunday, October 7, 2018. The VROC meeting was held in the dimly lit conference room of an AIDS service organization in Garden Grove. On that particular day, only seven people had showed up to the meeting: anh Hai, Roy, Mama Huyền, Mama Chi, Moon, August, and me. There were typically 10-15 attendees, but it seemed like everyone else had other plans.

Despite the lower number of attendees, August’s face did not reveal any disappointment. At the sound of Mama Huyền’s comforting words, he clasped his hands together, stuck his neck forward and exclaimed, “Really!?” August had revealed to the group that he was not out to his family. Immediately, Mama Huyền started to give August advice. Mama Huyền told August, “Nếu con muốn thì mẹ có thể nói chuyện với bố mẹ của con được [If you want then I could talk to your parents for you]”. In this exchange, Mama Huyền spoke to August as if he were her child. She referred to herself as “mẹ” (mother) and to him as “con” (child). Although August and

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Mama Huyền had just met, August looked at Mama Huyền with adoration and hesitation. He had not expected to meet an older Vietnamese woman who would support his gay identity.

In order to understand how my informants think about family and kinship, I need to explain how deeply embedded the ideals of family are in the Vietnamese language. Since VROC is an intergenerational Vietnamese American organization, many of the meetings, activities, discussions, and conversations occur bilingually (English and Vietnamese). As such, the deployment of Vietnamese personal pronouns not only becomes a mechanism for expressing care and intimacy, but I argue that they become affective signposts that orient VROC members towards the reconstruction of a queer Vietnamese family. In the Vietnamese language, the words “I” and “you” are dependent on the relationship between the speaker and who they are speaking to (Tang, 2007). These words are deeply intertwined with Vietnamese ideologies of the family. For example, “anh” is used to refer to one’s older brother or a person who identifies as a man and is a couple years older than you. Conversely, the “anh” would call me “em”, which is used for younger siblings or a person who would be the age of one’s younger sibling.

Lê Thi Diem Thúy, a prominent Vietnamese American novelist has claimed that she never names her narrator in her book *The Gangster We are All Looking For* because “in Vietnamese, you only exist in relation to someone. Like you are someone’s brother, or you are someone’s child, or you are someone’s niece” (College, 2006) Thus, her narrator, is generally referred to as “child” by the narrator’s parents and other older adults. There is no need for a name when each person is able to carry an identity that is co-constructed by social relations with others. She explains that regardless of blood relations, Vietnamese people speak in a manner that connotes these terms of kinship. While there is a formal “I” in Vietnamese, *tôi*, it does not denote any sort of relationship.

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In thinking about the co-construction of social relations vis-à-vis Vietnamese pronouns, my argument about pronouns as affective signposts builds upon queer of color theorist Sara Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. In her book, she explores how bodies are situated and moved through the world (temporally and spatially) in relation to other objects and subjects, which she calls orientations. Although Ahmed's question about orientation stems from her interest in sexual orientation and how sexuality can be oriented to "who" or "what", I extend that line of thinking to Vietnamese personal pronouns. In essence, "mẹ [mom]", "con [child]", "chị [older sister]", "anh [older brother]", "em [younger sibling]" all become signposts that orient VROC members toward a collective "who" that represents a shared sense of belonging and community. This orientation becomes especially important in the context of queer Vietnamese children who lack a sense of belonging from their own blood-related kin.

For readers who are not Vietnamese, I know what you are thinking: yes, it is indeed confusing. But bear with me. These personal pronouns denote a speaker's social position, age, and gender in relation to whom they are speaking to. According to Vietnamese studies scholar Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, the Vietnamese nationalist ideology is embedded in the family as well. In this way, the boundaries of filial piety dictate the roles that everyone must play. The father and the mother sit at the center of the immediate family and have specific gendered responsibilities that they must carry out. Thus, family relationships are relationships of responsibility. In essence, family relationships are affective relationships, meaning that they are predicated on acts of labor, care, intimacy, and obligation. These affective relationships are constructed by larger ideologies of gender roles and the role that the family plays in socially reproducing citizens for a nation-state. When VROC members invoke these familial terms, do

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we see a replication of these relationships of responsibility? And if so, do these relationships mirror heteronormative ones?

Meeting Culture

In the time that I have been with VROC, the organization typically meets twice a month on Sunday mornings from about 10:00am till noon. More often than not, we went until 1:00pm. When I first joined, the meetings took place at anh Hai's house. Anh Hai's one-story house sits in a quaint, suburban neighborhood with an elementary school located across the street. Once inside the house, I immediately saw that the small 400 square feet living room was transformed into a makeshift meeting space fit with foldable EZ-up plastic tables and chairs of all different kinds. The four moms were already sitting down chit-chatting. Their raucous and gleeful Vietnamese filled the air with gossip, laughter, and sarcasm. Other members would slowly trickle in. As with most Vietnamese-centric spaces, time was elastic. In fact, we have a Vietnamese saying, "giờ cao su" – rubber band time. VROC fully embraces rubber band time and structures the first hour of every meeting for eating and socializing. As some members once told me, "It's *very* Vietnamese."

In other non-profit or community organizing spaces, I generally feel like there's a more serious tone. Meetings are supposed to start on time. There is a specific agenda with concrete items. Not to say that VROC does not have meeting agendas – we do, but the affective environment creates a form of activist sociality that I had not yet encountered. And this is part of why I argue that VROC's family-oriented structure of socializing, not taking themselves too seriously, and learning to play around with each other has helped keep this small, all-volunteer ran non-profit alive for the past five years. As Kath Weston describes in her ethnography of lesbians and gay men, "The centrality of the meal-sharing food on a regular basis in a domestic

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setting-certainly contributed to our growing sense of relatedness. In the United States, where the household is the normative unit of routinized consumption, many family relationships are also commensal relationships” (Weston, 1991, p. 104).

Defining and Pulling Apart Family

When I interviewed my informants, I asked each person to define what “family” means to them. They responded with a range of answers from affirming biological definitions of family and kinship to more radical, feminist and queer conceptions. The diversity of responses indicates that members of VROC are able to maintain their own individual understandings of family. Yet, their understandings of family become shaped by each other and by the culture and politics of VROC as an organization. I contrast the definitions that participants provided to me in their interviews with my observations at organizational meetings and activities.

The significant role of VROC in shaping individual members’ social and political consciousness was most apparent when they were asked to define what family is. The following interview excerpts demonstrate how VROC members pull from their experiences with blood-related (or biological) family members, their time with queer people and queer chosen families, and from their involvement with VROC to produce definitions of family. These experiences are informed by Vietnamese American politics, especially if we take the issue of place, Little Sài Gòn, into mind.

To start off, I reference one of the mother’s definition. When asked what family means to her, Mama Kim approaches the question from a rather feminist perspective:

The [unit of the] family is a small society in and of itself, but it is also tied to the communities around us. A family is not merely me, my husband, and my child. The three of us are not the only ones that are responsible for each other, nor should we live solely

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for each other. But my family, the three of us live together, but we should think about the people around us and the communities we are attached to. Everyone has a family. Of course, we might have our small families. If you were to tell me that my family is the most important, and that I, as a wife and mother, need to care for my husband and for my child, then no. That cannot be. I would not call that a family. I would call that a prison. I go off into my community work and I owe my happiness to all of those people. There is no way that only three people could create happiness for each other. My husband and child are only one part of my happiness. Family is the beginning, but it is not the end. It is only the beginning to everything else.

Out of the many definitions that I heard, Mama Kim touches upon important aspects of the family: division of social, affective, and physical labor, the gendered roles of the mother, husband, and child, sexuality, and indirectly, the role of the state. When Mama Kim references society, she alludes to both the United States as well as Vietnam. Her experiences of growing up in Vietnam and having immigrated to the US over 20 years ago impact the ways she conceptualizes family and societal expectations. When she says that, “everyone has a family”, she relies on the narrative that the family is a given; that the family is inherent and natural rather than a socially-constructed unit. However, Mama Kim bluntly challenges conventional ideas of family by offering a feminist critique of women’s roles as the social reproducers of human beings that must then go contribute to society. By calling the family a prison, Mama Kim resists the idea that a mother’s value is tied solely to her affective labor in the family unit. Instead, she explicitly says that her happiness comes from many sources in life including her community work.

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While Mama Kim took a rather macro-level approach to describing the family, many of my other informants found refuge in the family as an affective space. For example, anh Hai said:

The other concept [of family], my biggest example, is the concept of VROC. I've always seen VROC like a VROC family. VROC and the people in VROC is boundless and limitless in other ways. They tend to be boundless and limitless in terms of accepting me for who I am in terms of my sexuality, gender expression, other things related to that. Boundless in the ways that my family may not have. They're not boundless and limitless in terms of caring and feeding me in terms of the other [biological family]. That comes from the blood family. I think both have a sense of caring for each other.

From these quotes, which contain sentiments echoed by most of my informants, VROC as a family takes on powerful affective meanings. It becomes a site of belonging, community, and shared identity. By branding itself as a space for queer Vietnamese Americans, VROC is unique within the landscape of LGBTQ organizations because it explicitly pays attention to the intersections of racial, gendered, and sexual formations.

VROC is not without its faults though. Members also recounted to me multiple moments of tension, frustration, and anger within the group. In the following quote, Roy alludes to one particular incident:

There are moments where people have been just like a group and the group just like any family, you could imagine, right? And that kind of process of growing with each other, that has for me strengthened what VROC, as a family, has been defined for me...

When Roy says, "the group just like any family, you could imagine, right?" he refers to an incident where an older gay member was accused of cultural appropriation. The older member, referred to as anh (older brother) Khanh, had been called out by Roy and other younger queer

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members in VROC. Khanh and another member, Nancy, had also talked about this incident during their interviews. All three discussed how this incident caused a dramatic rupture in the relationships between the younger members and some of the older members who did not understand or agree with the cultural appropriation accusation. Since the three members are implicated in VROC's family structure, they could not simply walk away from the situation. The unintended consequence of the family structure is the unwritten rule that family ties are ties of obligation and responsibility. Although this moment caused stress, frustration, and anger multiple members, Roy's quote ends with "that kind of process of growing with each other" has strengthened VROC as a family to him. That sentiment of growing together was also repeated by Khanh and Nancy in their interviews. I offer this one incident to demonstrate that VROC is not perfect and to illustrate that the usage of family does have its drawbacks when it comes to issues of emotional labor, ageism, and (reluctant) obligations.

2.2 "Queering" Motherhood: Social Reproduction of the Family

Drawing on Kibria's "Power, Patriarchy, and Gender Conflict in the Vietnamese Immigrant Community", my informants both reaffirm and reconstitute ideals of family, kinship, and the deeply gendered and racialized role of the Vietnamese mother (1990). Kibria argues that Vietnamese women upheld structures of patriarchy to ensure their own economic success. Some of that argument resonates with what I observed with the VROC moms. While they reconstitute their love for queer youth who are not their biological children, the naturalization of mother-child love that they espouse and the continued affective labor that they provide to the organization reaffirm their performance as a mother within a family.

The way that the moms describe how they feel about being called mẹ/má demonstrates a sense of cultural affiliation. These affective ties to things that are familiar in Vietnamese culture

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serve as a mechanism to maintain difference in the US nation. For some minoritized people, dealing with racism in the US manifests itself in maintaining cultural difference to resist assimilation. In the following excerpt from my interview with Mama Kim, she describes how she feels about being called mother by the queer youth and the queer older brothers in VROC.

At the end of day, children are born from their mothers. The child is literally made in the body of the mom, not the dad right? The child bears a physical part of the mom. They wear a part of the mom's skin. With children, the word "mẹ" carries a deep meaning of love.

That love is dịu dàng [tender], it is affectionate, nó trùm bọc de [all-encompassing and enveloping]. There is no word more beautiful than the love that is attached to a mother-child relationship. Whoever is in VROC, all of the younger ones say "mẹ" because VROC is all based on love. Doing work for VROC yields no pay. It's time consuming. Sometimes my husband and son yell at me, "Why are you always doing things for VROC!?" Then, what's the point? We go because of the love we have for each other. The love between mother and child is wide and vast.

Any grown woman that comes into VROC, after a couple times, can become "mẹ" to all of the VROC youth. We don't say "cô, o, tím, dì [aunt in various configurations]" but we use "mẹ" because only mẹ can be generous (bao dung) to their child and love their child the most.

The manner in which Mama Kim describes a mother's love harkens back to Vietnamese ideals of what a mother should be, which is a figure who shows unconditional love for her children. By relying on these dominant Vietnamese ideals of motherhood that are so intricately tied to affective labor (doing unpaid work for VROC), sacrifice (not spending time with her husband

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and son), and filial piety (feeling a sense of obligation to caring for Vietnamese children), Mama Kim maintains a sense of cultural difference. She once remarked to me that she used to feel embarrassed speaking in public at marches, rallies, and press conferences because of her lack of English proficiency. However, Mama Kim now proudly speaks in Vietnamese at these engagements because she knows that another VROC youth will translate for her. She takes pride in her linguistic abilities and rather than feeling stigmatized from a sense of “otherness” she uses her Vietnamese storytelling skills to spread values of inclusion.

Mama Huyền, the oldest mom in the organization, feels a sense of responsibility not only to herself but also to the other moms and older brothers. Mama Huyền prides herself on looking feminine, always wearing makeup and high heels, and acting in a “proper” manner. She takes on her role as the elderly mother figure quite seriously because she knows that the mother is responsible for supporting everyone else in the VROC family. Mama Huyền said:

Mình thấy... hình như cái tiếng mẹ... nó **bao gồm** hết tất cả cái tình thương lại. Và các anh đã thấy mẹ với cái tình thương... [I feel that... the sound of the word mother... it encompasses all of the feelings of love together. And the older brothers have seen me with that love...]

Mama Huyền feels that the older brothers afford her a sense of respect that they would to a motherly figure even though Mama Huyền is quite close in age with some of them. She speaks as though it is much more reasonable for the youth to call her mẹ because of the age difference. But the fact that the older brothers – who range in age from 40-70 years old – also call her mom motivates her to try her best to take on that role of maternal figure. She wants to act as a positive role model. She feels a sense of responsibility to take on that role because of her age and social position.

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So I don't do anything bad. So if your guys need anything, mẹ jump vô [in], mẹ help even tụi con [you children], mấy anh lớn [the older brothers] or các mẹ [the moms]. So I don't mind you know. I try to sống tốt như vậy để cho tụi con nhìn [live well like so that you children can see], "Oh mẹ đúng là như vậy [the proper mother is like that].

As the oldest mom in VROC, she tries to be a role model for the younger moms too. When asked if she feels stressed for taking on this role, she does not feel that way at all. At the age of 66, she feels lucky to be involved in community work and to be around the youth, it makes her feel young. "That's why mẹ trẻ trung hoài [always youthful]." However, in asking if Mama Huyền feels stressed about the mothering she does in VROC, I realized that I may have asked a question that might not receive an entirely truthful response. For in that moment, the question of whether or not performing motherhood is stressful traps Mama Huyền, whose sense of femininity is intimately tied to her role as a mother. Although she may say that she is not stressed, her response does not preclude the physical, emotional, and affective toll that come at the cost of performing motherhood.

In the following passage, queer of color and performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers (2018) discusses the role of mothering for women of color:

For women of color, mothering is always already complicated, rearranged, negated, and interrupted by the forces of racialization and the racialized and gendered division of labor. Take the famous example of the Moynihan report, where a black mother's relationship to her child is described as the root of blackness's inherent social pathology and lack of development. While this is particularly true for black mothers, this logic extends (in differential ways) toward brown, Asian, and indigenous mothers. And it is especially so for the racialized mother whose child turns out to be queer or trans. She is

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either blamed for making the child like that or blamed for not disavowing the child fast enough when the child is. (loc. 2015).

Mama Huyền's sense of obligation and responsibility to the other mothers and queer members of VROC differs from the expectation that Chambers-Letson sets out for "the racialized mother whose child turns out to be queer or trans." While Mama Huyền did indeed go through several years of struggle to accept her gay son, Nate, her involvement in VROC has queered (literally and figuratively) her performance of motherhood. When Mama Huyền first found out that Nate was gay, she reflects on countless days of crying, feeling empty, and in denial that her son could be gay and consequently could no longer carry on the family name via procreation. In fact, she did blame herself and sought to identify where in her mothering did she go wrong. Through therapy from anh Hai and from joining VROC, Mama Huyền found a supportive community where she learned about LGBTQ people in a Vietnamese cultural context. Her involvement in the organization has allowed her to transform her sense of motherhood to one where she is able to reconstitute her love for Nate but also to other queer children who may have struggling relationships with their own biological parents.

Conclusion: Constructing the Queer Vietnamese Family: Counternarratives to Little Sài Gòn Politics

I return to this excerpt from Chambers-Letson's (2018) *After the Party: a manifesto for queer of color life* because it aptly describes the radical possibilities of queering nonbiological kinship:

As José Muñoz writes, while "it is true that not all families of color affirm their queer sons and daughters," for queers of color "the generalized gay community often feels like a sea of whiteness ... and thus the imagined ethnic family is often a refuge. It is a space where all those elements of the self that are fetishized, ignored, and rejected in the larger

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queer world are suddenly revalorized.” So while the performance of queer or nonbiological kinship can open up “family” for queers and trans people of color (which is a necessity when one’s biological family has failed or disavowed you), it can also remake the notion of kinship such that your biological mothers have a place at the table next to your queer mothers. These overlapping forms of family can be of critical importance: queer and trans of color children need all the help they can get if they are going to survive this world. The same goes for their mothers. (loc. 1987)

For VROC members, reimagining and reconstructing an intergenerational, queer Vietnamese family goes beyond queer people forging nonbiological relationships. Rather than exile blood-related family members who have enacted harm and violence, VROC becomes a site for reconciliation, healing, and the merging of queer chosen families and blood-related kin. With that said, not all members display the same desire for their blood-related kin to interact with the organization. In fact, one of the queer members, Roy, once told me, “It’s weird. The [blood-related] family of VROC members never actually come to meetings. They support us, I think, but they are not involved with the core organizing.”

Set against Little Sài Gòn politics of Vietnamese and US nationalism and heteropatriarchy, VROC and its members offer important counternarratives about LGBTQ Vietnamese Americans and their allies. Orientalist logics typically portray Vietnamese people in the U.S. as ideologically backward, conservative, and inherently homophobic. Yet, VROC’s activism in the community represents a different set of Vietnamese people who are loud and proud about their queer identities. The intergenerational feature of the organization lends itself legitimacy in a community that relies heavily on patriarchal authority from older Vietnamese men who had previously served in the Southern Vietnamese Army during the Second Indochina

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War (or Vietnam War). By incorporating the voices of Vietnamese mothers, queer youth, and older queers, VROC deploys the intergenerational, queer family as a clever cultural strategy to win over the hearts of their ethnic community. In doing so, not only has VROC marched in the Lunar New Year parade from which it was originally excluded, but the organization has also established itself as a significant political force in local, state, and national discourses surrounding LGBTQ Asian Americans.

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Chapter 3: Impact of VROC on Sức Khỏe/Health

We didn't set out to achieve our mission within five years, right? It's a marathon. It takes time.

We're like, okay, not feeling so great. Let's take some time off. That's cool. That's chill.

– Anh Hai,

Sức khỏe [health] is everything. When you're healthy physically, it helps the mental.

– Mama Chi

Introduction

On a hot summer Sunday in August, I arrived at anh Hai's house at 10:30 AM. I had just driven down from west Los Angeles, zooming down the 405 freeway to attend the Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC) meeting. Having left the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, I noticed how peaceful and quiet anh Hai's neighborhood was. I parked my small, white sedan and walked briskly to the house. The meeting was supposed to start at 10:00 AM. I was late. As I walked up anh Hai's concrete driveway, I see his two white poodle dogs pawing at the front door. The dogs barked in glee, ready to pounce on me.

From the door, I saw that anh Hai and Roy, two gay Vietnamese men in their early 30's and late 20's respectively, were already sitting inside. I could hear some of the VROC moms rapidly exchanging some gossip. Walking into the sunlit living room, I greeted everyone, “Chào mẹ, chào anh” [Hi mom, hi brother].⁶ Immediately, the moms ask me:

⁶ As a reminder, in Vietnamese, we use terms of familial address as pronouns when speaking with others even if they are not blood-related. However, VROC has a special subculture, where all the queer people, regardless of age,

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Con khỏe không? [Child, are you well?]

Dạ khỏe. Mẹ khỏe không? [Yes, I'm well. Are you well, mom?]

If I did not specify that this exchange had occurred between me and the VROC moms, then it could have sounded like it happened between me and my biological mom. It is a common way for Vietnamese speakers to greet one another. Instead of asking, “How are you doing?” as one would in English, Vietnamese speakers ask “Bạn khỏe không?” which literally translates to “Are you well/healthy?”

The word sức khỏe, translated to English as health, is a compound Vietnamese word that combines sức (force/strength) and khỏe (strong/healthy). The concept of sức khỏe for Vietnamese communities is one that consistently shows up as a strong priority. Sức khỏe encompasses physical health, mental and emotional health, and spiritual health. We see this clearly in how linguistic and cultural conventions normalize asking about each other's health as a common greeting, but also in the ways Vietnamese people conceptualize and practice well-being. During my participant observations and semi-structured interviews of VROC members, I paid close attention to how cultural practices explicitly and implicitly informed behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. It is important to note that I do not define culture as a static phenomenon, but rather one that evolves and morphs as it interacts with gender, sexuality, place, politics, and history. I explicitly draw on Marjorie Kagawa-Singer's Cultural Framework of Health to define culture as that which “describes the *dynamic* [emphasis: mine] system of beliefs, values, and lifestyles (influenced by geography, technology, and commerce) that are passed down from one generation to the next of particular population groups” (Kagawa-Singer, 2000). For VROC members, this

refer to the straight women, who are the biological mothers of queer children, as mom/mama/mẹ/má. In traditional circumstances, mẹ/má is most exclusively used for a Vietnamese speaker's biological mom.

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means that culture interacts with constructs of Vietnamese and U.S. nationhood and patriotism as well as local Little Sài Gòn politics.

Research Questions and Central Argument

In this chapter, I address the latter two of my research questions in this project: (1) What are the possible social support functions of VROC's intergenerational, family-oriented structure? (2) What are the possible impacts of participation in VROC on the sức khỏe (or health) amongst members? Why and how does community organizing impact sức khỏe?

Firstly, I argue that through the reconstitution of the Vietnamese American family, VROC members create their own unique forms of social support and social networks that result in positive health benefits. To illustrate linkages between emotions, affect, and health, I analyze how VROC members define health. To capture the essence of their words, I use the concept of sức khỏe, the Vietnamese word most equivalent to health.

Secondly, I build upon VROC members' affective conceptualization of sức khỏe by analyzing the intergenerational, familial model of the organization. This analysis is linked to Chapter 2's discussion of how VROC members simultaneously defy and affirm conventional US and Vietnamese notions of family and kinship; and, moreover, how the members reimagine and recreate an intergenerational, queer Vietnamese American family. By reconstituting the family into a network of chosen social ties, that rely on affective forms of care and labor, VROC members generate their own social support culture within the organization. In doing this, they unintentionally impact the health of each other. In particular, the mothers in VROC serve as a special case study because of their emotional journeys in learning to accept their biological LGBTQ children and to become advocates for other LGBTQ Vietnamese people.

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Finally, I conclude that members' direct and indirect involvement in political, social, and cultural community organizing produces sentiments and emotions of collective and individual empowerment. Through grassroots organizing predicated on notions of queer kinship, VROC members spatially and affectively rearrange their social, cultural, and political environments in order to feel more secure, visible, and included.

A key construct underscoring this chapter is understanding the cultural and social construction of emotion such that “of the culturally constituted self, [it is] positioned at the nexus of personal and social worlds” (Lutz & White, 1986, p. 417). Social and cultural anthropologists have long argued that emotions help individuals make sense of their relation to the social world they belong to (Lutz & White, 1986). Emotion, as opposed to affect, is a linguistic phenomenon. It relies on *being named* (i.e. the conscious acts of saying/thinking I feel sad, I feel happy, I feel lonely, etc). In my analysis of how informants describe and enact queer practices of family, much of it will dwell on emotions and affects (the pre-linguistic and bodily reactions) (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Mankekar, 2015). From a post-phenomenological perspective, emotions and affects do not arise solely from the individual. Instead, emotions and affects arise from socially constructed realities such as those shaped by political economy, racism, and heteropatriarchy.

With that in mind, an individual's emotional reaction does not merely come from within, but rather that emotional reaction is shaped by social, cultural, and political systems. A recent review of the psychosomatic medicine literature found that since the early 1930's, the relationship between the social environment of emotional states and physiology were recognized and, with advancements in scientific technology, the re-emergence of “biopsychosociocultural” research has emerged (Herrmann-Lingen, Melzer, & von Boetticher, 2019). Throughout the interviews and my participant-observation, VROC members frequently described their

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organizing work and VROC, the organization, in familial terms couched in strong relational emotions. Moreover, VROC members overwhelmingly conceptualize health in terms of emotions. In the next section, I discuss the various ways in which VROC members define health and analyze how those definitions could be framed using theories of affect and the social construction of emotion.

3.1 Defining Health as Sức Khỏe in VROC

While we sat on opposite corners of the full-sized bed, I listened to Linh talk about her experiences navigating her sexuality with her biological family and finding solace in VROC. I first met Linh at VROC's 2017 Thanksgiving party, held at Mama Kim's house. When I first walked into that party, I noticed that Linh was one of the few people who looked like she was around my age (i.e. someone in their mid-20s). Linh, who had dark brown hair that barely passed her shoulders, energetically introduced herself to me, "I give hugs, not handshakes!" However, that bubbly energy was not as present during our one-on-one interview. Instead, Linh's speech was slower than normal. She paused and contemplated her answers when I asked about her sexuality and thoughts around family. When I inquired about health, Linh looked down at the blanket before saying:

I think mental health is very, very important. So, if in my mind, I feel mentally like I feel mentally strong and not like in desperate need of [pause] [sigh] an escape or like a need to abuse things such as alcohol or drugs... uhm like being mindful, knowing that when something happens and it makes me angry, that I am aware that I am angry or that I am aware that I am hungry and that I need to like feed myself. Uhm. That and being physically healthy, getting some sort of movement in the day. It also feeds into the

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mental health. Uhm. And also, having healthy relationships with my family and healthy relationships with my colleagues and maybe healthy relationships with strangers.

I asked every informant to define health for me. In almost every single one of the 15 interviews, my informant usually paused and expressed a sentiment along the lines of, “I’ve never thought about that before.” This was surprising to me because some of the members lived professional lives as social workers, one person was a nurse, and another person worked in a genomics laboratory. Yet, when they described health, common terms came up. From Linh’s definition, key words such as “mental health” and “healthy relationships” with family and friends were similar across interviews. Some members talked about physical health and the need to exercise regularly. For Jason, a 30-year old gay Vietnamese man, he said:

So, I would like make it into making it into a daily routine, where I would go to school and, like, run around the tracks or doing exercise or whatever. So, it started out as, you know, being lonely and not having anything to do. Um, and the positive aspect that came out of it is having a physical lifestyle.

In this excerpt, Jason mentions how loneliness served as the catalyst for a physically active lifestyle. His loneliness stemmed a variety of circumstances: immigrating to the US as a child, having to stay at home while his parents worked, feeling deviant in his gay orientation, and feeling stressed from financial instability. By contextualizing Jason’s loneliness, we can start to understand how experiences of racial and sexual minoritization along with migration compound to produce a state of health. Importantly, this state of health is relational. For example, when Jason describes feeling deviant from having sex with other men, that feeling exists because heterosexism defines homosexuality as other, different, and immoral. One cannot exist without

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the other. These relationships of power and othering are intensified when taking into account that heterosexism interacts with racism and US nationalism.

While some members, like Jason, did talk about physical health, most of the participants focused on emotional comfort and mental/psychological states. For instance, many of the members tied health and happiness together. In the following quote, Joy, a 32-year old lesbian and co-founder of VROC, said:

Health, happiness, you have to be happy to have good health to be honest. Because if you're not happy, everything going down and go down where you get sick. Yeah, because if you not happy, you would have your immune system cannot— shut down you and that's when you get sick.

Joy, who also happens to be a nurse, connected the absence of happiness to the physiological process of one's immune system breaking down. The link between one's emotional state and well-being have been clearly documented (Sadler, Miller, Christensen, & McGue, 2011; Sue, Yan Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012).

While we know that happiness is linked to better health, the more interesting question is how and from where do VROC members derive that emotional state? On the one hand, happiness may indeed be an emotion induced through one's conscious psychological state. On the other hand, by viewing happiness as an emotional state that is shaped and informed by socially-constructed environments, I argue that VROC members must continuously grapple with and defy the unsettling heterosexism and queerphobia present in their local ethnic community in order to achieve happiness. So, if happiness is the proxy for good health, then what are the necessary social, cultural, and political conditions that would produce such a state?

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Compared to the informants who took their time to define health, the three VROC moms that I interviewed responded immediately, reciting Vietnamese proverbs such as: *Có tình, có tiền, có sức khỏe hà? Có ba cái thứ đó cuộc đời của mình sẽ hạnh phúc.* [Love, money, and health? If you have those three things, then your life will be a happy one.] Out of those three, the moms declared that health was the most important. Mama Kim said that this depends on age because, at her current age of 50-something, health is essential to think about. She believes that if she cannot live a healthy life, she cannot express her love and care for all of the children that she cares about. From Mama Kim's quote, we can see that her motivation to be healthy is predicated on her ability to provide and care for children. The affective labor and social reproductive work that is involved with Vietnamese motherhood undergirds the function of health. Here, we see that health is maintained for the collective good rather than for individual livelihood. This contrasts with a Eurocentric perspective of health, which would ostensibly center on the individual and the need for the individual to feel better for their own sake (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

The ways in which VROC members defined their *sức khỏe* emphasized relationships built from affective labor and emotional connection. When the mothers volunteer their time, listen to the stories of queer Vietnamese youth, console them in times of worry and anxiety, and cook food for them, these are all forms of affective labor that create a relational state of health. The mothers feel great because they are able to fulfill their responsibilities as maternal figures. The youth feel great because they have a maternal figure who supports them. Furthermore, these relationships are reciprocal: the mothers and the youth provide forms of emotional and affective support to one another.

3.2 Reconstituting and Queering the Vietnamese Family: Generating Unique Modes of Social Support Networks

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In this section, I analyze the intergenerational, familial model that serves as the backbone for VROC. Since the members conceptualize sức khỏe as an outcome of social relationships, I argue that VROC's reliance on queer notions of family and kinship fosters a culture of sức khỏe. While VROC members use familial terms to describe their social and emotional relationships with one another, they queer the conventional Vietnamese family. By queer, I mean the process of deconstructing an accepted set of norms to recreate a form that exists outside of convention. I also mean queer to denote sexual and gender identity (Chambers-Letson, 2018; Eng & Hom, 1998). VROC members literally queer the Vietnamese family with their bodies, but they also create new meanings of family through their intergenerational structure.

The emergence of the VROC "family" is not a given. Over a period of relationship building, expressing vulnerability via personal storytelling, and organizing around principles of social justice, VROC members gradually began to describe their organization as a family. Nancy, who is one of the organization's youngest members, joined when she was in high school. At that time, she was volunteering at the LGBT Center in Orange County. One day, a white woman asked if she wanted to speak at a Westminster city hall hearing because a group of "gay Vietnamese people were denied the right to march in the Lunar New Year parade". Without a moment of hesitation, Nancy said yes, unknowingly thrusting herself into a series of events that led to her joining VROC. Before VROC was formally established, Nancy described a key moment that brought everyone together,

Really, it was like, yes, we were political through the Tết parade thing but after that we're just trying to figure out like, what are we like a real support group? Are we this, are we that? But like there was this one time where, yeah, we all felt, yea we were all disconnected from each other, but then we had like a gay ass circle, where we all like,

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told like, everyone came out with their coming out story. I started opening up more, and then everyone opened up more. I think that's what... like to be real with it, like, build our relationship with each other.

Although VROC members might not have definitively called the organization a real support group, their actions indicate otherwise. Providing an intentional space for the purpose of community building allowed members to practice vulnerability. Nancy aptly points out how other members felt more comfortable in sharing their stories and feelings after hearing from others.

For this community building exercise, the focus was on “coming out” narratives, a concept that has emerged over time as a defining milestone for queer identities and queer subcultures (D'Emilio, 1993). Coming out narratives, when shared, illicit particular emotional responses that are patterned by sociocultural attitudes towards queerness and its oft-associated stigmatized status. In this case, queer Vietnamese people listening to each other's coming out narratives produced collective sentiments of solidarity, resonance, sadness, guilt, shame, and resilience. By calling attention to these emotional strengths and traumas, VROC members developed affective ties that eventually allowed them to deploy tropes of family as a descriptor of the organization and its organizing strategy. Although VROC members may name various emotions in reaction to sharing one and listening to another's coming out narrative, I intentionally use “affective tie” here because it is the gut reactions and immediate physiological responses (e.g., crying when hearing someone else's coming out story) that ultimately cement these relational bonds.

As VROC progressed and came to take on more traditional community-based organization practices such as weekly meetings, members turned that space into a social support

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one as well. Since the organization is entirely volunteer-run, meetings typically took place in a member's home, usually at one of the moms' houses or an older member. The first hour of every meeting is dedicated to socializing and eating. Structured meeting time starts in the second hour complete with an itemized agenda, delegation of tasks, and discussion of upcoming events. Roy, who is the public relations chair of VROC, describes the first hour of meetings as follows,

When we go to meetings, we check in with each other about how each other are doing.

We genuinely want to know what's going on in people's lives. And we want to support that if not challenge that in the best way possible. There are moments where people have been just like a group and the group just like any family, you could imagine, right? And that kind of process of growing with each other, that has for me strengthened what VROC has a family, has been defined for me like we as a group have been growing together.

Check-in's at VROC meetings typically start off with the facilitator asking everyone to go around saying how they are doing. In many of the other community organizing spaces that I have been, the check-in portion typically does not take an hour, especially for a group of 10-15 people. However, members of VROC answer this question with great care and at times, to great lengths. Much like the initial outpouring of vulnerability that Nancy described, most VROC check-in's involve members sharing deep anxieties and issues that they are battling with at that moment in time. Not every member will share negative experiences. In fact, the check-in time is also an opportunity for talking about one's successes, accomplishments, and even minute happenings that might sound humorous.

Through these unstructured times of socializing, breaking bread together, and expressing vulnerability, VROC effectively incorporates a social support group feature into its operations as

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a non-profit organization. In doing so, many of the members have shared with me how this improves their perceived mental health. Thanh, a 27-year old gay Vietnamese man, said:

I would say more improve my mental health. My physical health is fine. Uhm. I get more connection to those people, more like uhm friendship, build up friendship, build up community. Uhm. I get to share a lot of personal stories you know. In exchange, I hear other people improve their mental health just by sharing stories. It's a very powerful way to get out there, to release that negative mental energy.

Thanh talks about building social connections and listening to others share personal experiences as the basis for improving his mental health. In this sense, improved mental health is an unintended outcome of VROC's social support structures and activities. I say unintended because the organization does not explicitly seek to improve members' health. The organization's mission is focused on creating a space for LGBTQ Vietnamese inclusion. In the process of forging that safe space, members inadvertently foster a culture of sức khỏe.

For another member, King, who is a transgender man, he finds solace in that VROC provides an identity-based space that he can connect to:

Like being around people who are like me. I feel like I don't have to explain anything. It's easy to talk to. Uhm and to see people who have gone through the same struggle as I have. To have uhm deep-loving compassion, empathy, and uhm yeah, I mean I love all of them. They are all you know very nice people, I guess. [laughs] I mean they are all very supportive and I really appreciate that.

One of the previously mentioned members Linh introduced King to VROC. The two are romantic partners and rarely are seen apart from one another. King is also an international student from Vietnam. When I interviewed him, he had just graduated from a master's program

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in counseling psychology. Having moved to a new country in his 20's, King initially had a difficult time finding a social circle. With that context, VROC was able to provide King a space to just be and not have to explain being Vietnamese and transgender.

Mothers

There are four primary mother figures in VROC, all of whom have been with the organization since its founding in 2014. Two of them, Mama Kim and Mama Huyền, were connected to VROC through their therapist who believed that the moms had much to gain from being part of a queer Vietnamese community organization. As it turns out, the moms' therapist was anh Hai, the co-founder of VROC. As a licensed clinical social worker, anh Hai blurred the lines between his professional and activist life. Prior to joining VROC, the moms recounted to me harrowing stories about their journey to fully accept and love their blood-related children who came out as queer and transgender.

Over the course of an interview, Mama Kim broke down into tears when she talked about the day her child said that they identified with a gender different from the one they were assigned birth. Grabbing a handful of tissues before she could continue talking, she went on to tell me how she felt a deep sense of fear and shame when her teenage child said, "I'm not a girl. I'm a boy." Mama Kim described this moment as one of the longest seconds of her life. It was as if time stood completely still. Her senses froze – shocked at hearing this news. Mama Kim responded, "Don't ever say that again. Don't say that to me, your mother. You can dress like a boy and act like a boy but don't ever say that you *are* a boy. Never speak of this to your father and grandmother". When Mama Kim first joined VROC, one of the older gay members, anh Tu remarked,

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If you see Mama Kim... oh my god the first time when I come to VROC for a meeting I look at this lady, "Who the hell is that?" She looked so depressed. Everybody talking and laughing and she's just like [imitated a deadpan face]. Yeah. She not like this now. She just like... always so depressed that she cry and she's like you know... oh my god, I go home and I feel so sorry for her and people know that she's just [chuckles]- but now oh ho ho! [voice goes up in excitement] She's a crazy lady.

As she told her story about her trans son, she expressed significant remorse and guilt for the 5-year long battle that she carried out with her child. Over the course of those five years, Mama Kim and her child encountered sleepless nights, emotionally strained interactions, and hostility towards one another. Mama Kim says that she owes her life to VROC because she was able to meet Mama Huyền, who was simultaneously struggling to accept her gay adult son. Not only did both moms find solidarity in one another, but they were able to start learning about LGBTQ identities and cultures from older queer Vietnamese people. By being able to teach the moms about queerness in the Vietnamese language and supporting them in their journeys with their children, a sense of peace and happiness was achieved. Upon reflecting about how VROC has impacted her, Mama Kim says:

We don't exercise together but what VROC has done is boosted my morale which in turn has impacted my physical health. My spirit has become stronger, happier, and that has made me healthier.

For Mama Huyền she recalls how “Anh Hai only gave me chỗ Mỹ [American places].” It is important to note here that when Vietnamese people say “chỗ Mỹ” which translates to American place, it implies White and English-speaking only. Thus, Mama Huyền did not

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understand anyone in the support group and they could not understand her either. So she told Anh Hai about this problem. Mama Huyền said,

Oh, there must be plenty of Vietnamese families and parents who have LGBT kids. But there is no group to support those people. So I thought that we should try to start a parent support group and see how it turns out. I did not imagine that would result in the founding of an entire organization. [With this group], we can help other Vietnamese people using the Vietnamese language. We can share with each other and we will understand. It's much easier.

Mama Huyền cited a cultural difference in mind/mentality “tâm tư” between American people and Vietnamese people. Without having that “East-West” cultural difference as a barrier, she believed that their support group would be better. The benefits of social support groups that share ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities are well-documented in the public health literature (Benjamins, 2013; Bogic, Njoku, & Priebe, 2015; Valente & Pitts, 2017).

The parental support group is an important function and service that VROC provides. The four moms - Mama Kim, Mama Huyền, Mama Chi, and Mama B – create informal sessions with other Vietnamese parents who have questions about how to navigate their child coming out as queer or trans. Many times these sessions take place in Mama Huyền's kitchen. As I interviewed her at her wooden dining table, she gestured her hands around the room indicating that “so many moms and dads have come through this house to figure out, “now what?” when their child comes out.” Although the moms are not trained psychologists or therapists, their personal expertise in struggling through accepting their child affords them a position of legitimacy. It is this legitimacy that connects them to other Vietnamese parents who may not have previously been open to discussing LGBT-related matters at all.

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Rather than offer clinical therapy to the parents who come to the support groups, the VROC moms only share their journeys and reflections. As the moms share their experiences with other parents, they often come back to the theme of family, that “gia đình là gia đình [family is family]”. Mama Huyền said,

Look at our society. I bet not even 100% of them accepts LGBT people. When our child comes out, there is some suffering. And on top of their own suffering, they experience a society that does not accept them. So if our family does not support them, then they have nothing – no foundation upon which to stand. You don't [have to] care about society. Just care about family.

The continuous return to the symbol of the family illustrates VROC's main organizing strategy of affective modulation. Although Massumi takes affective modulation to mean the mass media influencing and shaping specific registers of affect within a nation, VROC's deployment of the family and its associated affective relationships of care, labor, and belonging can be seen as a sort of smaller-scale altering of Vietnamese parents' understanding of queerness and family.

Conclusion: Spatial and Affective Rearrangements, Little Sài Gòn, Sức Khỏe/Health

The traditional Left was really left behind by the culturalization or socialization of capital and the new functioning of the mass media. It seems to me that in the United States what's left of the Left has become extremely isolated. So, there is a sense of hopelessness and isolation that ends up rigidifying people's responses. They're left to stew in their own righteous juices. They risk falling back on rectitude and right judgement, which simply is not affective. Or rather, it's anti-affective affect - it's curtailing, punishing, disciplining. (Massumi, 2015, p. 37)

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What Massumi describes as the Left here is a political contingent that privileges a particular kind of self-righteous, leftist radical politics and discourse that run the risk of coming across as demeaning, unforgiving, and uncompromising. In the current era of Trumpism, the United States Left must grapple with its revolutionary visions and organizing strategies whilst balancing an increasingly affective divide between the Left and the so-called Moderates and the Right. Amidst these national politics, VROC enters the stage in the politically contentious Little Sài Gòn community, which has historically voted Republican up until the 2016 presidential election (nguyen & Nguyen, 2017).

Little Sài Gòn's Vietnamese immigrant and refugee community does not easily fall under the Left-Right political spectrum of the United States. Vietnamese Studies scholar Thu-Hương Nguyễn-Võ cautions against transposing political ideologies onto Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, who come from a very different and particular political trauma of the Second Indochina War and the Vietnamese communist revolution (Nguyen-Vo, 2005). The Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese community has maintained a great deal of cultural difference by establishing the largest Vietnamese ethnic enclave outside of Vietnam. In doing so, Vietnamese people have sustained their cultural and political values as a way to cope with the racism and foreignness of the United States.

Specifically, the Vietnamese people maintain varying degrees of cultural difference and hegemonic anticommunism through the social reproductive practices that begin in the family. Many children of Vietnamese refugees are taught to decry communism for the horrific violence and trauma that it inflicted upon hundreds of thousands of those fleeing Vietnam. They are also taught to believe in the natural order of heteronormative and patriarchal family, which was widely reinstated when the Federation of Southern California Vietnamese said, "LGBT people

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are not a part of our culture” as a justification for denying queer Vietnamese people the ability to march in the Lunar New Year parade in 2012 and 2013.

Knowing that the Vietnamese media are responsible for disseminating swathes of information to the Little Sài Gòn, VROC members strategically formed an intergenerational membership that had the capacity to speak in Vietnamese on talk shows, radio channels, and pen op-eds in newspapers. By relying on the common symbol of the Vietnamese family as a unifying social entity, VROC members affectively and spatially rearranged the Little Sài Gòn community to promote acceptance and inclusion of queer Vietnamese people. Their method of storytelling, sharing deeply emotional experiences of coming out, existing in Little Sài Gòn as a queer Vietnamese person, moms learning to rellove their queer children, pulled on the heartstrings of the broader community.

Not only did VROC members use the ethnic media to their advantage, but they held LGBTQ acceptance workshops at local schools and also attended local government meetings to demand the right to march in the Lunar New Year parade. Jimmy, a 25-year old gay Vietnamese member said, “I felt every time we do a workshop at like [schools] it like adds more fuel to like rekindle! Everyone's like motivated and organized to go do something!” By positioning themselves in spaces that historically have marginalized queer Vietnamese people, VROC members reoriented cultural and social objects to fit their own needs. In essence, they claimed space in the very places that historically sought to exclude LGBTQ people.

In the course of their grassroots activism, VROC members reconstructed an intergenerational, queer Vietnamese family that served as a significant source of social support that has lasting implications for individual’s health or sức khỏe as we say in Vietnamese. Sức khỏe becomes an unintended benefit that VROC fosters through its unapologetic queer, radical

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familial love. I believe this could all be summed up with what Mama Kim told me one day, “This unfamiliar thing has vastly changed and saved my life.”

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

And sometimes the self-love like, in our process of coming out, it's really about self-love. So, and I think in that process, it's, it's a lot of internal work. But there's a lot of things that we can get from people's support... that we can get from people that also help us with the self-love. Yeah, we're building that up for ourselves. – Anh Hai

We're Here, We're Queer, Happy New Year initially started off as a personal desire to find a queer Vietnamese community in Southern California. Little did I know that a Thanksgiving party at Mama Kim's house would lead to a year and a half of ethnographic research about the premier LGBTQ Vietnamese American nonprofit in the United States. Since its informal establishment in 2012, the Viet Rainbow of Orange County has made local, state, and national headlines with its activism in Southern California's Little Sài Gòn community. By garnering the support of over 400 people at their 2013 protest of the queerphobic Lunar New Year parade, impacting tens of thousands of people through the Vietnamese ethnic media, and grassroots activism on a national level, VROC has firmly positioned itself as one of the leading voices for the LGBT Vietnamese community. This small, all-volunteer run non-profit organization allows us to bear witness to the collective power of angry, upset, and fiercely passionate queer Vietnamese people and their nonblood-related moms who will not stand for any further discrimination.

In this thesis, I argued that VROC's intergenerational family structure and grassroots organizing tactics serve as a case study that offers possible theoretical, political, and practical interventions in queer of color studies, feminist studies on family and kinship, social network and public health studies. Specifically, VROC members reconfigure and queer the concept of the

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Vietnamese family in ways that morph biological and chosen kinship into an affective vehicle that can be used to drive political change. As a whole, VROC members do not cast aside their blood-related kin and instead create familial bonds between their biological family and their queer chosen family. Through a reconstitution of gendered maternal roles and the flattening of power relationships across age generations, VROC members create a Vietnamese family that both resists and reaffirms traditional modes of family and kinship.

It is through the affective deployment and reimagining of the family that VROC was and is able to be incorporated into the Tết parade and into the “hearts of the Little Sài Gòn Vietnamese people”. As such, I also argued that this reconfiguration of the family serves as an important intervention into public health studies. In using the symbol and affective relationship of the family, VROC members formed a unique social network and social support group that have significant impacts on people’s health. Rather than define health as quality of life or well-being, I use the Vietnamese word “sức khỏe” to capture the richness of my informants’ conceptualizations of their overall physical, mental, and emotional health. In essence, VROC, as an organization, fosters a culture of health rooted in a shared sense of ethnic, gender, sexual, and political identity.

Furthermore, through grassroots organizing, VROC members spatially and affectively rearranged the Little Sài Gòn in order to feel more secure, visible, included, and in power. Their political intervention in the Southern California Vietnamese community comes alongside a gradual rise in the number of left-leaning progressive Vietnamese organizations. However, VROC’s use of affective modulation allowed them to connect with a wide range of Vietnamese community members that might have been alienated had the organization used more traditional

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Leftist tactics that might have mirrored communist violence. From this, VROC members demonstrate both the sociopolitical and health impacts of community organizing.

Limitations

Confirmability (Methodological triangulation): My participant-observation was only for 6 months. Had it been longer, I could have noted different changes in behaviors and attitudes that could only properly be observed over a longer course of time. Such changes might include new members feeling burnt out from participating in the organization or from members experiencing stress from life-work issues. 6 months is not a long time to observe significant changes in membership composition, organizational strategic planning, and relationship dynamics. I recognize that most of this project views VROC from a resiliency perspective, which may come off as overly valorizing the organization and its members. As such, I do not want readers to think that every meeting and relationship in VROC is all rainbows and sunshine. There are most definitely moments of tension, debate, drama, stress, and strained relationships. Thus, what I observed and analyzed is specific to my participant-observation period. For future research, an extended ethnography, one that spans several years, may yield more nuanced findings. An extended ethnography might be able to answer questions such as: What happens when a member identifies VROC as a site of violence or another member as abusive/violent? How does the organization work with other LGBTQ non-profits? Does the symbol of the family arise in those organization-organization relationships? How does the organization grapple with the non-profit industrial complex whilst maintaining a culture of health?

Transferability: The findings of this study may not be transferable to other social contexts such as community organizations that center on non-Vietnamese identities. *We're Here, We're Queer, Happy New Year!* is specific in its analysis of an LGBTQ Vietnamese organization. The

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analysis is culturally and contextually specific in its attention to the usage of Vietnamese pronouns, the subcultures of VROC, and the political context of organizing in Little Sài Gòn. However, my analysis of the social dynamics in VROC may be transferable to other LGBTQ Vietnamese community-based organizations such as QTVietCafe in the Northern California Bay Area.

Credibility: Prior to conducting this research project, I built rapport with VROC members by volunteering with the organization for 6 months. During that 6-month period, I attended social gatherings, meetings, and events. As I started to conceive this project, I shared my ideas with VROC leadership to gain feedback and approval. In doing so, I aimed to be as transparent as possible to foster an open, honest relationship between the researcher and the researched. My writing reflects this transparency through my explicit analysis of my positionality as the researcher. Throughout the thesis, I attempted to be clear about my own reactions and interpretations of participants' actions and comments.

Implications

This project has a variety of implications that are important to consider for LGBTQ, Vietnamese people but also for others who reject or find conventional modes of family and kinship to be restricting, violent, and/or toxic. For LGBTQ Vietnamese people, this thesis offers the first academic archive of VROC's organizational history and its important contributions to the local Little Sài Gòn politics. By producing this archive, I hope that other LGBTQ Vietnamese people will find a sense of belonging and comfort knowing that there is an established, welcoming community for them. Importantly, the message of VROC extends to Vietnamese family members who are struggling to accept their queer or trans kin. There is support for both LGBTQ Vietnamese people and their straight kin. From this case study about

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VROC, that support has been shown to have instrumental impacts on individuals' sense of self, sense of belonging, and purpose in life.

Additionally, my hope is that this project offers theoretical and practical implications to other communities that struggle with the family. As a site of violence and heteropatriarchy, the family is not always and not necessarily a source of good health. Rather than take the family as a biological truth, this project contributes to existing feminist literature on kinship. In that sense, nontraditional family structures may also be seen as a site that can influence health in positive and negative ways. Additionally, VROC illustrates that non-profit organizations have the potential to provide social support spaces even if doing so falls outside of their mission statement. In a way, VROC represents the possibilities of de-professionalizing the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Yet, what are the uses of learning about an intergenerational, queer Vietnamese family? How might this model offer us an alternative way to deploy notions of family? And what are the limits to returning to the family as a prevalent symbol/object in how we orient ourselves to reality?

Beyond VROC, this project has implications for queer of color critique theorizing. As queer of color critique theorist Rod Ferguson states in *Aberrations in Black*, “queer of color critique approaches culture as one site that compels identifications with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by state and capital” (2004, p. 3). VROC serves as a case study for viewing the impacts of homophobia as it interacts with racism and hegemonic ideas of culture in ethnic Vietnamese communities. On the surface-level, one may view VROC's parade denial as an instance of homophobia. However, queer of color critique asks that we view how homophobia and heterosexism are always simultaneously intersecting with racism and capitalism. With that

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lens, VROC's parade denial is not homophobia in a vacuum. Instead, the denial is a manifestation of homophobia that is influenced by the Vietnamese American community's attempt to maintain a sense of cultural difference within white hegemonic America. By maintaining Vietnamese cultural ideals, the community can withstand the racist structures of the United States. However, in maintaining that strategy, the Vietnamese American community has enacted a certain amount of violence towards its queer members. Therefore, I extend queer of color critique theory by specifying how homophobia morphs when tinged with racial politics of difference as survival. Racial politics of difference as survival refers to strategies such as 1) the establishment of ethnic enclaves, like Little Sài Gòn in Orange County, and 2) maintaining cultural difference and resisting assimilation into white America as coping mechanisms against racism.

Future Directions

While I did not quantitatively measure specific health outcomes, my project elucidates the mechanisms and processes that might explain why VROC members describe their quality of life and well-being as "better and happier" since joining the organization. As I continue to pursue this research, I intend to incorporate mixed-methods approaches that will empirically measure the health impacts of LGBTQ Vietnamese organizing while continuing to uncover the various ways that these communities resist racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy. Future studies could also examine the longitudinal impacts from participating in LGBTQ organizations across the United States.

Additionally, I believe that future research could look at ways to connect LGBTQ Vietnamese organizing in the U.S. to similar movements occurring in Vietnam. I leave the reader with the following questions because for me, this project is about generating questions.

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Ethnography gives us a chance to answer, “How do we know what we don’t know?” The transnational connections between queer diasporic activism and activism in the motherland could help us answer questions such as: How does queerness differ depending on place for Vietnamese people? Consequently, how does Vietnamese-ness differ depending on place? What are the political interventions that queer Vietnamese people are making in their transnational activism? How could queer Vietnamese transnational activism reconcile relationships between the diaspora and Vietnamese nationals? What does all this mean in the context of hegemonic anti-communist beliefs in the Vietnamese diaspora and a communist-government Vietnam?

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