

## Vietnamese *les* (lesbian) gender, community, and space in the phantasmagoria of real life

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Vietnam turned heads around the world in 2013, as possibly the first Asian nation to legalize same-sex marriage. Vietnam's post-reform era after *đổi mới* began in 1986 and the country's admittance into the WTO in 2007 seemed to advance the postsocialist nation in contingent ways into a period of semi-state controlled and privatized ownership of public space, discourse, and arenas of social engagement. In this milieu, how are gender and sexual subjectivities manifesting anew or differently in spaces of rapid development, such as urban sites of privatized space or businesses of petty consumption during social gathering? Vietnamese female homosexuals, who self-identify as *les*, are carving out spaces online as well as urban space offline to coordinate the transformation of what *les* call their "*les* community" (*cộng đồng les*).

Based upon ethnographic research since 2006, recorded interviews, and video-analysis, this presentation will analyze how *les* appropriate a popular and heteronormatively themed Vietnamese short story to tell a liberalized parable of *les* romance in the context of *tình nghĩa vợ chồng*, a traditional value system that shapes love and long-term commitment between married couples. The skit and these otherwise heteronormative themes were "remixed" for the stage, as the *les* producer explained, then performed at a *les*-only café during one of the most well-attended *les* community events in Saigon. Analysis of this skit brings into view the ways that *les* genders are produced and mediated within the physical space and neoliberal economy of the *les*-café, which triples is a home, business, and community center. Not merely a performance but a co-production of community space, *les* skits improvise, create, and intentionally stay true to life—a phantasmagoria of real life—in order to project a liberalized and idealized *les* gender and family life in a broadening *les* community.

**Natalie Newton** holds a B.A. with honors in women's studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Anthropology from the University of California, Irvine. Her research on Vietnamese lesbians (*les*) has won two national awards, including a Fulbright-Hays grant and an award from the Association for Queer Anthropologists, a division of the American Anthropological Association. She is actively engaged in academic and applied research for social justice. In 2013, she founded the Queering Viet History Project, during an historic campaign for LGBT inclusion in the Lunar New Year Parade in Westminster, CA, the Vietnamese diaspora's largest ethnic enclave. She is currently featured in the first documentary on Vietnamese queer women, "Queer Vietnamese-ness" (2015, filmmaker Quyen Nguyen-Le), on tour internationally. Her academic publications can be found in *GLQ*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, *The Routledge Handbook on East Asian Sexuality*, and *Journal of Vietnam Studies*.

She was most recently a full-time strategic campaign researcher for labor unions in Los Angeles and proudly served on the Executive Board of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance Los Angeles Chapter.

**Wednesday, April 26, 2017**

**12:00 Noon**

**Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue**