

CONTINGENT INVISIBILITY

Space, Community, and Invisibility for *Les* in Saigon

Natalie Newton

October 10, 2010 (10-10-10), was a day with a “good number” (*số đẹp*) in Vietnam, perceived to bring good luck to the hundreds of private events, parties, and other special occasions organized on that day. Just before rush hour, about two dozen Vietnamese young women hit the road on bicycles, crisscrossing major boulevards in downtown Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The riders perused national monuments, government offices, and corporate towers and malls that have come to symbolize the economic strides of Vietnam’s contemporary postreform era. Cycling single file through the busy streets, each woman in the group wore a different colored T-shirt. To onlookers, this women’s bike contingent may have elicited curiosity, perhaps even nostalgia for a time when Saigon’s streets were crowded with bicycles rather than motorbikes as they are today. However, little did most bystanders know that they were witnessing Vietnam’s first participation in International Coming Out Day (ICOD).¹

The riders were all Vietnamese lesbians (locally termed *les*, pronounced *lét* or *lēs*), recruited to the ride through invitation only. The riders wore monochrome shirts, representing six colors of the LGBT pride flag: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Riding in chromatic progression, their bodies displayed a literally mobile and mobilizing transnational icon.² The ride’s organizer hoped that wearing unusual colors and choosing this rather scenic bike route would help disguise the riders as Asian tourists, who have populated Saigon’s streets in increasing numbers since Vietnam’s *đổi mới* policy opened the Community Party–led country’s doors to global capitalism in 1986. Saigon has transformed into what the sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoang calls an “emergent international city.”³ Despite lacking an advanced public transportation system, a major international stock exchange, and an active influence in international affairs, Saigon increasingly pushes its influence as a “part of the peripheral zone in the global capitalist mar-

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ket whose social and economic structure is increasingly shaped by processes of globalization from above and by practices of transnationalism from below.”⁴ Saigon’s urban landscape as an emerging international city is central to how ICOD manifested transnationally and to its role in the emerging *les* community. The *les* bike riders knew one another through one of the most popular Vietnamese *les* webforums, VietLavender.com.⁵ News about ICOD circulated on the webforum, but *les* on this ride challenged the idea of “coming out” as a form of public disclosure. The ride’s organizer also arranged for a private security guard escort—not a police officer—to follow on motorbike. The security guard was otherwise clueless that he was escorting two dozen *les* commemorating ICOD. The organizer of the *les* bike ride hoped that the guard would give the ride an appearance of legitimacy and divert police harassment.

ICOD’s mission is to combat homophobia through collective and simultaneous public disclosure of one’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer identity. However, Vietnamese *les* participants agreed that this ride would have no explicit signage, remaining instead “hidden in plain sight.” *Les* riders said that they participated in the ride to “come out” (used in English) to themselves [*cho bản thân*], but not necessarily to proclaim themselves as *les* to the Vietnamese public.⁶ Only bystanders who could connect the meaning of the rainbow symbolism of the T-shirts to the day’s date coinciding with ICOD could gain satisfaction in witnessing the otherwise unnamed, mobile spectacle.

This article explores the productive power of “invisibility” in the formation of a marginalized community in an urban environment. The ICOD bike ride used various levels of a kind of strategic invisibility that facilitated a sense of Vietnamese *les* “community” in Saigon, in the face of social stigma. The ride’s success as meaningful to the *les* who participated was contingent on a collective knowledge of the rainbow symbolism, the identification of the riders with the symbolism, and the agreement of the stakes of participating in an international event intended for publicity. *Les* also relied on the relative obscurity of the rainbow symbolism in 2010, which has circulated in the *les* community only recently, preceding Vietnam’s first LGBT pride bike ride in 2012.⁷ Flirting with the edge of mass public disclosure, *les* bike riders felt that this level of confidentiality through symbolic coding, selective participation, and a security guard escort was crucial in the event. Even though they were participating in an international “coming out” event, *les* were protecting themselves against policing of Vietnamese public domain, as well as *les* fears about family rejection, workplace discrimination, and public shaming in some of the busiest streets in Saigon. After the ride, the organizer posted a few pictures and a short article on VietLavender.com, one of five *les* webforums, view-

able to members only. Examining *les* community events like this ride, this article explores the relationship between visibility, invisibility, and social territory in the formation of the contemporary *les* community in Saigon.

I treat the relationship between “space” and “invisibility” as a heuristic device to examine community formation in urban space. Henri Lefebvre proposes a double-ended axiom: society produces conceptions of space, as much as space produces conditions of society.⁸ Space does not exist a priori: “Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it.”⁹ Extending Lefebvre’s argument, I propose that invisibility is a social condition intimately intertwined with space, as a visual-spatial metaphor for misrecognition of bodies, communities, and sociopolitical issues, as well as the occupation or appropriation of physical space. Saigon’s urban environment offers unique insight into ways that *les* manipulate and occupy a space of invisibility, in the context of neoliberal political and economic transformations of the city’s public culture. Invisibility of *les* as individuals, *les* community events, and sociopolitical issues of concern to the *les* community is a social condition produced in relation to urban space in Saigon, as much as invisibility is productive of “*les* space” in the city. I highlight this coproduction across a range of activities that facilitate the formation of the “*les* community” in Saigon.

I use Gerard Delanty’s definition of “transnational community” to describe what *les* have relatively recently termed the *les* community (*cộng đồng les*).¹⁰ Transnational communities “operate in the global context but are the projects of locally-based communities.”¹¹ The *les* community encompasses transnationalizing subjectivities (such as *les* gender that appropriates Western butch-femme), political issues (such as “coming out” and ICOD), and language practices (English code-switching) as it continues to form in Saigon, the nation’s international business center and most populated city. Though Vietnamese *les* are the primary organizers of community events in the city, Vietnamese diasporic lesbians also participate online. What *les* call the “*les* community” includes a multidimensional domain—perhaps multiple “communities”—composed of an overlapping network of people who call themselves *les*, bi (bisexual), and female-to-male transgender men (*người chuyển đổi giới tính*); *les* webforums; sociopolitical issues debated in the community; shared practices and values around gender, romance, and subjectivity; and a network of spaces where *les* socialize and organize activities in the name of “community.” I refer to community formation as the social processes and debates around these elements of community, especially in relation to formations of new subjectivities and how they occupy urban space when creating social spaces.

The central argument of this article is that *les* community formation is made possible largely through mobility in and between a liminal social position that I call “contingent invisibility.” *Les* appropriate the city’s transforming public culture, in order to socialize en masse or organize community events. The contingencies of invisibility that I outline relate to three conjunctures of power, space, and community: (1) state governance as Vietnam enters global capitalism, which enables and limits *les* use of urban space for community organizing; (2) a contingency of knowledge of social spaces that *les* come to learn as they participate in the community; and (3) contingencies of self-disclosure of one’s stigmatized status, which *les* may strategically hide through sociolinguistic practices or through physical segregation of space.

To arrive at contingent invisibility as a framework to understand Vietnamese *les* spaces, I first outline some major theoretical debates in social science around “visibility” and “invisibility” of gay, queer, and LGBT urban communities. In conversation with queer studies of Asian metropolitan communities, I argue that invisibility can also be theorized more thoroughly as a productive force, rather than a narrow framing of invisibility as a negative consequence of social inequality. I combine these frameworks with a review of feminist literature on women’s invisibility in “queer space.” I complicate the insights of feminist scholars by expanding on studies of Vietnamese urban space that argue that Western notions of “public” and “private” may not map onto Vietnamese society, either historically or contemporaneously.¹² Recent rapid urban transformations have direct implications for Vietnamese *les* community formation, providing the context within which contingent invisibility facilitates particular kinds of urban interaction and space claiming.

To add nuance to these contemporary debates around visibility, urban space, and queer community formation, I outline the parameters that define “invisibility” in Saigon urban space and the “contingencies” along three dimensions stated above for *les*. The second half of this article illustrates contingent invisibility through three vignettes from my fieldwork and recorded interviews in 2006–10.¹³ The ethnographic discussions are arranged in order of spaces, with increasing depth of use for *les* community organizing and *les* exclusivity. First, *les* occupation of public spaces of mass youth crowding show how state-mediated “public” and “private” space in Vietnam challenge contemporary notions of Western visibility. Second, the Lesbian Games League demonstrates the contingencies of community agreement in collective invisibility. Finally, a *les*-only café that also doubles as a home, community center, and business for *les* demonstrates a teetering balancing

act that exemplifies limits of Vietnam's reform policies as mediating factors in *les* community formation.

Throughout my discussion of contingent invisibility, I return to a Lefebvrian framework that Michel de Certeau expands on to theorize cultural production and contingencies of power in an urban landscape. In Certeau's most often-quoted chapter, "A Walk in the City," he argues, "if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going farther), then the walk actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge."¹⁴ The present article explores how *les* make their community exist as well as emerge, hidden in plain sight in Saigon's urban landscape.

Queerings of Visibility and Space

A complex history and literature around queer visibility in urban space that precedes what I describe as Vietnamese *les* contingent invisibility in Saigon suggests the importance of the confluence of economic and political changes in the country leading to contemporary moments in transnational time like the ICOD bike ride. In his archival research, Richard Tran writes that French colonial Vietnam in the 1930s and 1940s exemplified a "flourishing of gender plasticity" in print media, featuring "a wide variety of queer figures that appeared in the public imagination: classical male friendships; army women disguised as men; women who possessed beards; women who undertook masculine writing; cases of cross-dressing in literary works; hermaphrodites who transcended the idea of sexual dimorphism; accounts of same-sex erotic relations; and numerous cases of sex-changes and the unknown frontiers of reproductive science."¹⁵ The anthropologist Frank Proschan discusses the colonial demonization of the practice of French pederasty with Vietnamese boys in Saigon opium dens, which are colonial legacies that have influenced modern Vietnamese homophobic terms such as *pê-đê*.¹⁶ Since Vietnam's socialist reforms, homosexuality has been systematically demonized as a medical pathology, psychological illness, or a "social evil" (*tệ nạn xã hội*), following lineages of political homophobia in the former Soviet Union and the Republic of China.¹⁷ In opposition to homophobic discourses, or derogatory terms for female homosexuals such as *ô-mô-i*, women's self-identification with the term *les* began circulating through Vietnamese online networks in 2001. Recent Vietnamese news on what reporters and *les* alike call "trendy *les*" (*les phong trào*) paint a picture of moral judgment toward women who skirt the responsibilities of proper repro-

ductive filial piety through consumptive behaviors in the opium dens of today: *les* karaoke bars and nightclubs.¹⁸ It is in this broader context of homophobia and women's subordination that I discuss the possibilities of *les* community emergence in between the cracks of a globalizing city.

The Importance of Queer Visibility

Eve Sedgwick famously argues: "The closet is the defining structure of gay oppression in this century."¹⁹ The Euro-American obsession with gay visibility begins with a modern subject, whereby "truth" of the self is correlated with spatial metaphors of an inner core, surrounded by concentric circles of social institutions such as family, religion, school, and work. Michel Foucault explains how this conception of self is the foundation for the modern "yoke of confession" for homosexuals, a weight that is lifted and reburdened in respective spheres of life through repeated self-disclosure, or "coming out."²⁰ On a social level, Andrea Brighenti argues that "regimes of visibility" are an optic metaphor of social relations, fundamentally concerned with power and social territory: "Visibility is a social dimension in which thresholds between different social forces are introduced. In this sense, the visible can be conceived of as a field of inscription and projection of social action, a field which can be explored as a territory."²¹ Invisibility, thus, has an apparently antithetical relationship to space claiming, whereby invisibility evacuates the power of collective presence in urban space as a form of "resistance." For example, within a liberalized human rights agenda—whether in the West or other parts of the world—queer visibility is a political strategy, combating invisibility, which is framed as a lack, deficiency, or negative relationship with the social institutions that privilege society's dominant classes. If urban space is considered a kind of social system, invisibility in the city also refers to a condition of lack of public presence or social territory, because of physical dislocation or misrecognition.

Though I readily accept the problems with queer invisibility within a Western, liberalized human rights framework, this article aligns more closely with works that also highlight the productive power of strategic invisibility as a complex form of resistance, specifically in relation to space claiming for marginal identities. Outright visibility and strategic invisibility coexist in Vietnam, especially in light of international media attention to Vietnam's striking down of its same-sex marriage prohibition in 2013.²² My aim is to complicate further the discussions that ethnographically highlight the productivity of "community," beyond individual identities in *les* urban space-claiming.

Asian studies of same-sex desiring and transgender subjects shed light on

a different path of queer resistance in the zone of conditionalities, impossibilities, and contingencies of subjectivity. Contributing to recent studies of queer subjects in bustling postcolonial or postsocialist cities, my work with Saigon *les* argues that subjectivity is intimately intertwined with the contingencies of “community,” a severely downplayed concept in studies of emerging neoliberalized constructs of gender and sexuality in developing Asia. This term’s material embodiment and physical relationship with the places and spaces that make up the “*les* community” is my central concern, as I, following Gayatri Gopinath, read the traces of “impossible subjects as they travel” in Saigon.²³ Rather than the cultural texts of Gopinath’s methodological milieu of musical genres, film, video, or novels, I read the city and the lived experiences of *les* who map their vision of community onto the sidewalk cafés, stages, and sports fields beneath their feet. My work here does not differ from Denise Tang’s framing of Hong Kong lesbian desires in “conditional spaces” in the shrinking city’s landscape, where commercial spaces of consumption act as “temporary sites of resistance for Hong Kong lesbians to validate their identities, form social networks, and question their political subjectivities.”²⁴ However, unlike Tang, I aim to theorize more deeply around the intentionality of *les* invisibility during my fieldwork, not only as a problem of class distinction between locales of petty consumption, but as a social phenomenon that motivated the formation of *les* community in relation to microcosms of social spaces.

Other recent studies in China relate similar influences of postreform social and economic changes on queer subjectivity. However, most of these studies focus on the individual, such as subjectivity in relation to the neoliberalized nation in Lisa Rofel’s study of “desiring subjects,” *tongzhi* or comrade subjectivity in relation to Chinese postsocialism, and most recently, Lucetta Kam’s study of Shanghai *lalas*, who negotiate multiple spheres of “public correctness.”²⁵ Similarly, other works on Indonesian *tomboys* across islands in the archipelago and Thai *toms* and *dees* in Bangkok have significantly destabilized gender constructs that are reflected in my work on what would otherwise appear as the globalization of Western butch and femme.²⁶ What I aim to complicate and add to this literature is a discussion that takes on the zeitgeist of “community,” as an especially emergent *les* urban community names itself and shapes individual subjectivities as women enter and exit these spaces.

In addition to Asian studies of the queer city, feminist critiques of queer space frame patterns found in my work with Vietnamese *les*. Feminists criticize androcentric conceptualization of gay space as a kind of resistance to heterosexism and homophobia, because it renders lesbian space “invisible” by virtue of lesbians’ fewer numbers or less visible presence in the city. Rather than focus on residential

enclaves or consolidated spaces in commercial districts, as studies of gay men's spaces have done, other authors discussing lesbian space highlight the importance of domestic and residential space, deterritorialized commercial spaces as a matter of women's economic disparities and gender subjugation in public space, lesbian feminist separatist community spaces, female homoerotic spaces that overlap with women's homosocial spaces, or women's spaces that appropriate LGBT-inclusive, gay male, and lesbian-friendly space.²⁷ These studies focus on female appropriation of various kinds of other urban spaces in ways that are physically and socially different from those of gay men, specifically challenging the notion that occupation of "public" space is necessarily the epitome of "queer visibility."

The geographer Natalie Oswin points out that "queer space" is a kind of oxymoron, because the heart of "queer" as a postmodern subject position defies the identity and stability suggested in the existence of such a space. Oswin argues that this queer space framing reinforces a "heterosexual/homosexual divide," where queer space is idealized as a site of resistance to heterosexual space.²⁸ Some authors point out the problematic conflation of "queer" with "gay" or "lesbian," in addition to ignoring race, class, and gender in spatial segregation.²⁹ As a corrective to these theoretical slippages, Oswin calls for two interventions: a "subjectless critique as a queer approach to space," which focuses on the study of the deployment of gendered, racialized, classed, and nationalistic norms, rather than on queer subjects; and an expansion of the use of queer theory to the study of heteronormativity (not only "queer space"), in conversation with race, class, gender, and nation.³⁰

Though Oswin's criticisms of the misappropriation of queer in space are welcome, her claim also hinges on a bounded notion of space. If space is understood as a process that is productive, rather than a physical location or bounded entity, queer space is not so oxymoronic.³¹ The diffuse, polyvocal, and dislocated elements of queer space as a kind of process or performativity are qualities that could also address Oswin's other demands for a queer geography that takes on challenges of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy. Likewise, Megan Sinnott rightly argues that "the almost fetishistic attachment the city and public space have for narratives of gay liberation" lead to "an erasure of sexual forms that do not conform to these expectations concerning spatial practice."³² Here, my aim is not necessarily to hold up *les* appropriation of urban space as the epitome of "visible queer community" but to recoup the possibility that *les*, as women, can also claim public space in ways much more complex than simply a dichotomous relationship with visibility or invisibility.

In contextualizing my ethnographic descriptions of Saigon, I draw from the

work of urban feminist anthropologists of Hanoi and Saigon who argue that conceptions of public and private in urban Vietnam fundamentally differ from the West.³³ Given these broader feminist interventions of conceptions of queer space, I explore the conditionality of visibility or invisibility in “communities,” as they are writ large within a collective consciousness. My focus is not to define queer space or lesbian space itself but to theorize *how* this space is made visible or kept invisible in the process of formation. I examine the modes of perception, disclosure, and gatekeeping of the borders of community space, and not just the politics of marginality that drive *les* to create these separate community spaces in the city. I frame this critique as “contingent invisibility” and discuss its manifestation through ethnographic vignettes of Vietnamese *les* space-claiming and community events in Saigon.

Vietnamese *les* do occupy urban commercial spaces as patrons, owners, and *les* community organizers. However, the kinds of spaces that *les* occupy in Saigon demonstrate a multiplicity of factors, including gender disparities in access to urban space, emerging neoliberal subjectivities that *les* deploy to combat negative stereotypes, the effect of globalization on Vietnam’s postsocialist political and economic agenda, and changing youth culture in contemporary Vietnamese publics. *Les* occupy a range of public sites of consumption, including cafés, bars, rented spaces for community events, and *les* separatist space. I theorize *les* invisibility as the *intention* of the community, not just as a *symptom* of social stigma. I consider space as a process of constructions of the public, private, and self, which also produces conditions of invisibility and visibility for subjects and communities. I argue that *les* space in Saigon is a production of community as much as the community is mediated through the existence and production of new urban spaces in the city.

Invisibility and Intention

Considering the above writings on the politics of queer invisibility in Western and Asian contexts, and feminist geographies of queer women’s space, I situate my conception of contingent invisibility at the intersection of four intimately related concepts: queer invisibility, passing, heterosexism, and the closet. I conceptualize gay, queer, or LGBT invisibility as a product of a dialectical relationship between subjects who discipline their bodies, speech, and actions to “pass” as heterosexually normative, and the unchallenged heterosexism of onlookers. This dialectical relationship renders *les* individuals invisible to the public at large, but also to one another sometimes. For Vietnamese *les*, “passing” may mean passing as a woman *or* a man. *Les* identified as B (a transliteration of “butch” from English) may

pass as men sometimes, as much as fem or bi (transliteration of “bisexual” from English) women pass as heterosexuals.³⁴ SB women (“soft butch”) who pass are misrecognized as “tomboy” heterosexual women or “(heterosexual) women with personality” (*phụ nữ cá tính*). Sinnott’s studies on tom subjectivities suggest a more transgender identity, which I do not find similar among the majority of Vietnamese *les* who identify as B or SB. Only a minority of Bs in my study wished to alter their bodies, and none identified as men. Likewise, I did not find fem in Saigon identified with heterosexual women, as in Sinnott’s study of dees who saw themselves as no different than heterosexual women.³⁵ What is at stake in this discussion of *les* community formation is the slippery line between passing, regardless of identification, and dialectical production of *les* invisibility when *les* organize as individuals and as a community in Saigon.

Les invisibilities are often intentional, though not always successful. Invisibility is made possible by (1) individual and collective compliance as a protective measure against social stigma, (2) new urban spaces of consumption and gathering in Saigon that facilitate individual and collective anonymity, and (3) a pervasive heterosexism that renders *les* bodies invisible. I focus on invisibility as a tactic to avoid social stigma that has sometimes unintended secondary consequence of facilitating community formation. The geographer Michael Brown sensitizes Lefebvre’s work on sexuality in space to the commodification of male homo-sex in Washington, DC.³⁶ However, Brown’s theorization of gay male invisibility in “producing the closet in urban space” stays at a level of reenvisioning the city’s spatial terrain through sexuality and commodification of bodies. Here, I propose a level of analysis that focuses on *community* rather than *sexuality* of same-sex desire in the city. Contingent invisibility frames the productive possibilities of “invisibility” as *les* navigate Saigon as a stigmatized group, and how they recoup this position for community organizing.

Contingencies

By “contingent invisibility,” I layer three definitions of the word *contingent* to demonstrate the process and the product of contingent invisibility for *les* community formation. First, I use *contingent* to mean that invisibility is “dependent” on institutions and structures, especially state policies and practices of governance. Vietnam’s *đổi mới* period of reform allowed the ownership of private businesses, such as cafés, restaurants, and bars, where *les* organize community events in addition to using these spaces for individual leisure. For some spaces, such as the *les*-only café, even individual leisure was framed as a community-building exercise within the context of an exclusively *les* space. The invisibility of these businesses

as *les* spaces is partly contingent on the state's neoliberal policies that define the businesses' parameters of operation. The Vietnamese state has no laws prohibiting homosexuality. However, police have shut down bars and nightclubs frequented by *gay* men and men who have sex with men in the name of eradication of "social evils" in the 1990s at the height of policing around these government-defined social behaviors.³⁷ Comparably, I outline ways that *les* use contingent invisibility to maintain a *les*-only café in relation to police surveillance. Contingency of invisibility here emphasizes a level of "uncertainty" of the nature of state intervention and the fragile occupation of public space. Contingent invisibility in this sense calls attention to the state apparatus that offers or withholds urban infrastructures where *les* community can emerge.

Second, I use *contingent* to mean a "strategic" invisibility of some *les* who choose to pass as heterosexual. This contingent invisibility may occur on an individual level, as *les* navigate the city as anonymous (heterosexual) individuals in public space. Contingent invisibility also occurs on a community level, during larger *les* events, such as in the case of the Lesbian Games League's (LGL) use of public access mini-soccer fields. In this sense, contingent invisibility counts on unchallenged heterosexism to render *les* invisible and therefore evade social stigma and, in some cases, police regulation. In addition, contingent invisibility as "strategic" depends on *les* conforming to gender norms that do not render their sexual subjectivities suspect. For some *les*, short hair and masculine attire give away that they are *les*. For others, *les* masculinity is misrecognized as male. For still others, women's masculine dress is completely overlooked as unrelated to homosexuality and seen instead as part of growing youth fashion trends in Vietnam, such as the unisex movement, originating from contemporary Korean popular culture. Here, I emphasize the intentionality and strategy when deploying contingencies of invisibility.

I also draw attention to contingent invisibility as a strategic use of physical space or physical markers to isolate or to make *les* or *les* community events only selectively known to *les* in the broader urban landscape. A few cafés used the interior design of the space, such as segregated rooms or partitioned areas, to host *les* community events. A wedding and community meetings happened on the second floor of one *les*-owned restaurant. *Les* organized my farewell party in the karaoke room of a newly opened café owned by an active member in the community. At one *les* café in Saigon that prohibits men from entering, the owners chose a location tucked deep in a residential alley, so that passersby would be unlikely to find the café by accident. Contingent invisibility refers to both the recognition of individuals as *les* and the concealment of physical space for *les* events.

Lastly, I use contingent invisibility as a double entendre, referring to the invisibility of a contingent, or “group,” whose inner circles of knowledge can coconstitute the group itself. For *les* in Saigon, like other LGBT and queer groups, meeting others with common sexual and gender affinities is a subcultural process of acquisition of knowledge, made difficult under broader conditions of heterosexism and isolation in society. Coming to know locations of spaces requires that *les* interact and attempt to gain access to *les* community knowledge. *Les* must also feel emotionally ready and able to confront their sexual or gender subjectivities reflected in others in these spaces. This preparation of consciousness already requires a certain level of willingness to admit one’s membership, if not participation, in the *les* community. Upon acquisition, this collective knowledge of *les* spaces is usually kept internal to the community. Additionally, *les* rarely, if ever, go to these spaces alone. These spaces are almost exclusively patronized by local Vietnamese women.³⁸ I argue that a key feature of the formation of the *les* community is this exchange of shared knowledge of *les* spaces. Frequenting these spaces coconstitutes and maintains them as *les* community spaces. Thus the “contingent” becomes a “community” through this process of knowledge production and spatial occupation.

Below, I highlight more ethnographic detail on how contingent invisibility is central to the formation and sustainability of *les* community in Saigon. I focus on three distinct social spaces in which *les* congregate. I have chosen to discuss these spaces among the dozen or so *les* community spaces in Saigon, as they exemplify three very different kinds of social zones that are generalizable to the other *les* spaces, are among the most populated in the *les* world, and the spaces facilitated some of the most important forms of community formation in Saigon. In the next sections, I move from discussion of spaces that are increasingly viewed as belonging to the *les* community and appropriated for community space. In sidewalk cafés (*quán vỉa hè* or *quán cóc*), younger *les* in their teens and twenties congregate in open-air spaces that Saigon youth populate at large, where *les* can occupy anonymity among masses. During LGL’s use of a public access soccer field, one of the most tenuous contingencies of *les* invisibility was the community itself. That is, *les* may be the most likely to “out” one another, when possessing such potentially damaging personal information about other *les*. This forced disclosure had subsequent ramifications on how *les* used urban space for future programming. In the *les*-only café, the community’s boundaries are regulated through external physical space, interior design for community meetings, and culturally, where men are prohibited from entering. The café owners strike a careful balance between operating the café as a kind of *les* community center and a for-profit business. For *les*, invisibility is

strategic and enabling, rather than merely a negative consequence of social stigma and repression.

Just “Passing” by: *Les* Appropriation of Saigon Sidewalks

At 9:30 p.m., the café server signaled to us that the café was closing. I was in the thick of an interview with a *les* community leader and her partner. Since many other businesses were closed at this hour in the city, the two suggested that we go across the street to a nearby park in Saigon’s downtown. We moved our bikes next to a crowded row of motorbikes, organized neatly but illegally on the sidewalk. On Sunday mornings, dozens of *les* frequent this park to play a popular street game in which they kick badminton birdies to one another with their feet. We sat on one of the park’s many sidewalks. Our eyes adjusted to the dim street lights as I turned on the voice recorder. With no one within earshot of us, motorbikes buzzing by, and the cover of darkness, we continued the interview for an hour and a half. At around 11:30 p.m., a loud whistle cut through our conversation. We bolted from the sidewalk, along with all the other young men and women who were casually enjoying the night air. The police were doing their rounds in the area. The streets in downtown Saigon are locally considered “model boulevards,” where public festivals are organized. The police waved their batons to indiscriminately clear all the young loiterers and their motorbikes from the park. Riding my electric bike alongside the *les* couple’s motorbike, I squeezed in two more questions, unrecorded, before we finally parted ways into the night.

I begin my ethnographic discussion of *les* space and community formation with a discussion of the public in Saigon, in relation to invisibility of *les* amid mass crowding of youth in public streets. *Les* presume that they “pass” as heterosexual in these sidewalks and parks, which represent a kind of urban space appropriation that mingles most openly with a public at large. Sidewalk spaces represent a low level of intentionality and sustainability as *les* community spaces as transient and open-air spaces. However, these spaces are important to *les* as a social lubricant for ties that strengthen other forms of *les* community organizing. Within these broader spaces of youth public consumption, *les* meet outdoors in public, under the protection of anonymity of mass crowding. This crowding is a relatively recent social phenomenon in Saigon, after *đôì mớì* facilitated the transformation of public spaces like sidewalks and parks into sites of consumption of leisure.³⁹ *Les* informal gathering in these spaces is a key glue that holds together the interstices of discrete moments of community formation.

My discussion of Saigon’s public spaces builds on ethnographic studies of

Vietnamese urban spaces and public culture, which focus on appropriation of public space for leisure, romantic escapades, or petty consumption. Aforementioned studies of gay, queer, or LGBT urban culture and visibility in the city have not adequately problematized Western notions of the “public” and “private” that underlie framing of visibility and invisibility of communities. I argue that contingent invisibility is a mechanism by which *les* community turns the city “inside out,” borrowing the anthropologist Lisa Drummond’s term, meaning that “private” activities such as intimacies of friendship and romance are brought out into the “public” in Vietnamese cities.⁴⁰ The significance of *les* spaces is that these social intimacies in urban space build a broader structure of a socially stigmatized community. Youth dating culture and appropriation of public spaces that Drummond and other authors discuss are not just spaces of leisure for *les*: they are the social lubricant through which a sexual community forms.⁴¹

Open-air sidewalk spaces in Saigon are a particularly productive starting point from which to begin discussion of Vietnam “public” space. Certeau theorizes “pedestrian acts” as kinds of invisible and microscopic uses of the city that represent unintended consequences of “proper” functionalism or structure of the city: “A rich indetermination gives them, by means of semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning.”⁴² *Les* contingent invisibility in Saigon’s emerging public sites of consumption in open-air sidewalk spaces and parks is precisely a kind of “second, poetic geography” that the *les* community maps onto the city.

Contingent invisibility of *les* community formation is significantly made possible through the transformation of “public” space in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam’s urban centers. For Habermas, the modern Western “public” sphere existed as a discursive space that belonged to the whole community, was regulated by social and legal norms, and was where political movements could expand to wider realms, sometimes to challenge the state.⁴³ In contrast, Drummond argues that this kind of “public” has never existed in Vietnam.⁴⁴ Prior to *đổi mới*, the state controlled all available spaces for leisure activities such as “parks, museums, sports facilities, and the ‘squares’ such as the area in front of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, in addition to spaces such as pavements which are used for recreational activities.”⁴⁵ Authors argue that the state’s push toward a market economy has also forced it to acquiesce to the increasing use of public spaces for private enterprise in this process of transforming urban centers such as Hanoi and Saigon into “modern” cities.⁴⁶ The state’s rolling back of administrative control over “public” space such as parks, sidewalks, and leisure sites facilitated the creation of what scholars debate as comparable to Western “civil society.”⁴⁷ However, with Vietnam’s

increasing participation in global capitalism, scholars also note that the state is increasingly unable to regulate these public-turned-private spaces, because of police corruption, overwhelming traffic, mass loitering, and irreconcilable tensions between maintaining public space for community use and fostering economic growth.⁴⁸ *Les* navigate contingent invisibility in this broader context.

Police try to regularly supervise private uses of public spaces where youth congregate for socializing, indirectly through enforcing traffic and parking laws. This surveillance is informally routinized, so that young people learn what time the police may enforce clearing of sidewalks. Young people, including *les*, become accustomed to this surveillance, leaving in a hurry when the police arrive. There is no targeting of any group over others and no official curfew for these public areas. However, refusal to leave could result in fines, or at worst, confiscation of one's illegally parked vehicle. These state-initiated conditions of limited economic opportunities for small private businesses and local police regulation of streets and parks mediate the infrastructural space in which *les* congregate in public, open-air sites of consumption.

In relation to these police-mitigated contingencies, contingent invisibility of *les* in these spaces is predicated on individual anonymity in crowds. Saigon's street scenes are young, especially crowded with people in their twenties and teens. Older *les* often feel out of place in these places, instead preferring indoor cafés. This urban landscape reflects a broader age division in Saigon, where 71 percent of the population is under forty years old.⁴⁹ After work, hundreds of unmarried lovers or friend groups huddle on the ledges of major monuments, and drink tea and coffee at sidewalk cafés for fractions of the cost at indoor cafés. The primary kinds of socializing I witnessed among *les* included informally getting to know one another and romantic dating. Here, *les* hang out casually or rendezvous before and after events, without fearing that others nearby will pay particular attention to their conversation. Seating is random and sometimes far apart on the sidewalk. The general noise level of the open-air atmosphere and traffic close at hand make sustained eavesdropping conspicuous, which creates a sense of privacy. Vietnamese *les* appropriate these emerging cultural norms of outdoor crowding for socializing for gatherings and community formation.

However, *les* do not congregate indiscriminately in the literally hundreds of public-access parks or sidewalk cafés in Saigon. Like Certeau's city walker, the *les* community "makes a selection" of the city's existing spatial elements and, in that way, creates a second topography layered on the historical and functional city (98). *Les* circulate knowledge of preferences for specific sidewalk cafés through word of mouth and on *les* webforums. These spaces go in and out of fashion among circles

of *les* friends and lovers, who may frequent the spaces in groups of friends, for anywhere between a few months to a few years. These spaces include unlicensed sidewalk cafés alongside walls or larger sidewalks of major monuments in Saigon. One *les* reflected that in 2006–7, she hung out with a dozen of her *les* friends at a historical monument in Saigon’s District 1. These days, her friends no longer congregate there, because of a fizzling out of the group’s relationships. These transient *les* spaces are a product of the contingencies of urban space and the social relationships that coproduce these places as *les* spaces.

The socializing that *les* do in these spaces facilitates broader community formation in a few ways. The open-air atmosphere allows *les* to both observe one another and temporarily suspend presumption that anyone was looking at them in particular. For *les* community leaders, a secondary consequence of spending a lot of informal time in the open-air spaces is regular visibility and accessibility to *les* community members, who may not have personal access to the leaders otherwise. *Les* would tell me to go to a particular sidewalk café, if I wanted to talk to moderators of *les* webforums, where I would likely run into them. *Les* and I drank coffee or tea at sidewalk cafés after regular meetings. This downtime facilitates rapport and bonding among volunteers, leaders, and other supporters of *les* community organizing events.

In these street scenes and sidewalk cafés, contingent invisibility is central to how *les* appropriate public space for community building; insofar as they selectively choose particular sites, they use these sites as spaces of socializing as extensions of community organizing, and they circulate these knowledges within community spaces, coproducing *les* community spaces. Choosing particular sites is contingent on friendship networks, subjective feelings of comfort and safety, and feelings of enjoyment at these spaces of leisure. *Les* occupation of these spaces is subject to the same contingencies of state regulation as any other youth and public space. Thus, within these open spaces of mass congregation, *les* in their teens and twenties, including many who are active community organizers, socialize within the contingencies of anonymity. These street scenes have some overlap with rented spaces for special events, such as the athletic fields of the Lesbian Games League. These spaces are not owned or operated for the exclusive use of *les*. However, organized community events in rented spaces have a stronger intentionality around “community” formation compared with the casual socializing that occurs in open-air sidewalk cafés.

Contingencies of the Contingent: The Lesbian Games League

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” said the leader of the Vietnamese Lesbian Games League. “Why should we have to line up on the field like we’re waiting for a punishment?”⁵⁰ As an invited board member to the Organizing Board of LGL and a participant-observer while doing fieldwork, I asked her if we, the Organizing Board, ought to stand together on the field when we announced to the fans that LGL’s final and championship game was canceled. A few nights prior, the four of us on the Organizing Board debated for hours about what to do about our predicament. Two of the top four mini-soccer teams refused to play in the finals. They refused to play against a team whose *les* coach had supposedly sent an anonymous text message that “outed” four *les* players of another team to their employer. The detailed text message led to the four players’ suspension and probation at their workplace. In addition, the local branch of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism was now alerted to LGL’s existence as an unlicensed sports championship, subject to fines and general censure. Since LGL had ended at that point, the ministry did not take action. However, intense pressure was placed on LGL’s plans for 2011. LGL’s games, which occurred over seven consecutive Sundays, aimed to bring *les* together, under the slogan “Because a Strong Community” (*Vì một cộng đồng vững mạnh*). In the end, the bigger dreams of LGL were collapsing under the smallness of personal rivalries and martyrdom of young community leaders.

Perhaps the most volatile contingency of *les* invisibility is the community itself. Who else but another *les* would possess potentially damaging information about one’s identity as *les*? The irony is that the various moves to protect the insularity of the *les* community have produced even more fragile walls, as the inner circles of knowledge twist in on themselves. For those who come to know the intimacies of the real names, workplace, and family of other *les* friends, the only thing protecting *les* from one another is an unspoken agreement that the power of that knowledge is so great. Most *les* suspend a belief that one’s trust could be so easily betrayed in these situations. In other situations, *les* also go by nicknames, used simultaneously as online handles on the *les* webforums. The coach and the four players were at one time close colleagues, who knew one another’s real names, workplaces, and often socialized outside work. Under conditions of social oppression, those who can be most dangerous are one’s closest intimates. Ironically, LGL’s leaders guarded more successfully over their institutional vulnerabilities with the government and Vietnamese law, compared to the disheartening betrayal that they could not control within the *les* community.

According to Vietnamese law, all sports championships must register with

the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, which implements national regulations for sports organized at the local level. The law is vague about what constitutes a sports championship (*giải thể thao*): number of athletes, number of teams, monetary funds, or other factors. Despite these legal stipulations, most local sports championships do not register, including ones much larger than LGL that have foreign corporate sponsors. LGL's vulnerability compared with these other unlicensed championships is its target population. A year prior, the ministry denied a gay men's group permission to organize a publicly gay sports championship. Fines, censure, or mass media about LGL would put *les* organizers and fans at risk for damaging other parts of their lives. One of the many reasons LGL had rejected financial aid from the Swedish Embassy, which would have to distribute the money through a Hanoian NGO, was that it would require a level of bureaucratic legitimacy that would put the event at risk. LGL's safest and most sustainable position was a space of contingent invisibility.

The contingencies of community involvement and urban space work in tandem to produce LGL, in all its successes and its failures in 2010. The sheer scale of this event required a careful selection of spaces that would allow forty to eighty *les* to congregate en masse, hidden in plain sight in Saigon. LGL 2010 spanned seven consecutive Sundays in December 2010, including three sports: fustal (mini-soccer, five-on-five), basketball (three-on-three), and badminton (doubles and singles). The fields we chose for the games were contingent on the amount of donations we received from the community. Each sport requires a different kind of field, which had to be as close as possible to the others, for the convenience of the fans, organizers, and volunteers. None of these fields could be rented out in their entirety, because no onlookers could occupy neighboring fields. During fustal games, upward of fifty *les* fans, twenty athletes, and all the volunteers congregated. We had only one sign, which displayed LGL's acronym, but did not spell out the words. After the anonymous text message was sent, LGL's leader decided not to put up the sign again. The needs, concerns, and investments of the *les* community were written over every inch of every field.

LGL is community formation disguised as a sporting event. It is not open to the public at large, nor is it openly discussed as *les* in the presence of outsiders who are not competing in the games. LGL represents a format of community organizing that maneuvers around state contingencies of organizing sports championships and social stigma. The overarching goal of LGL is to organize a space in which *les* can achieve physical and mental health through organized sports, sustained over a long-term period, longer than any other offline *les* event in Vietnam. However, the founders' intent is for the effects of LGL to last outside the seven-

week competitions. Tapping into what they perceived as a popular hobby of many *les*, the founders thought that they had facilitated the development of a broader *les* “sports movement” (*phong trào thể thao*). *Les* would create teams that practice regularly throughout the year, culminating in LGL. For the founders, sports are an allegory for life itself, in which one learns about teamwork, leadership, fair play, competition, and the wins and losses of everyday life. Through participation in this community event, the founders hoped that *les* could gain the confidence to later “come out” in their lives. Thus, shared participation in aspects such as financial stability of the event, investment in winning medals, and decision making about competition rules and regulations are more than just for the sake of maintaining a sporting event. The work is an investment in shared building of a “community.”

One way the *les* organizers maintained invisibility of LGL was through controlled communication about the event. We advertised only through *les* webforums and word of mouth. Approximately 10 percent of the athletes did not identify as *les* but simply wanted to participate in a women’s championship, which are rare in Saigon. All participants knew that LGL was for the *les* community.⁵¹ We told field owners that we were an intramural “women’s group.” According to LGL founders, the owner of the fustal field probably suspected that this was a *les* event, upon viewing the trophy, which has the words “Lesbian Games League” spelled out in English. However, he has never asked directly and appears elated that an all-women’s league occupies his field. LGL also brought a steady income to the field for seven weeks. A male soccer player on an adjacent field once asked a volunteer what the acronym LGL meant. She responded, “It means *Làm Gì Lạ* (“What Do You Mean Strange?”) Sport Championship.” The inquirer took her literally, repeating her words thoughtfully as if to remember, “*Làm Gì Lạ* Sport Championship.” *Les* controlled representation of the event in many ways, through selective advertising, partial truths, use of English and acronyms, or clever wordplay.

Contingent invisibility was central to LGL’s production, to avoid state surveillance and social stigma, and to strengthen community bonds. LGL came face-to-face with the unfortunate power that a single text message could wield over a community. LGL organizers were aware and concerned with legal stipulations during its events in 2009 and 2010, taking measures around choosing spaces and controlled communication. However, the implosion from within had left everyone staggering. The four athletes were convinced of the guilt of one individual, because she alone possessed all the information painfully displayed on the anonymous text message. The teams that dropped out of the competitions did so in protest of both LGL’s Organizing Board and this individual. Some thought her actions were selfish, cruel, and shortsighted of LGL’s long-term goals. Others thought the Organizing

Board should have structured the competitions to prevent such extreme rivalries. The core founder and chair of LGL's organizing committee believed these actions were admitting defeat, more so than protesting against any structure or injustice. "We must be better than them," she said, referring to those who had committed unfair play. "If we all merely drop out whenever we encounter injustices, there will be no one left in the community," she said.⁵² Her statement was part of the long shadow of allegory cast on and off the field, where sports mimic real life.

Café Duyệt: Neoliberal Blurrings of Public, Private, and Community Space

No single *les*-owned space in Vietnam has transformed the *les* community more than Café Duyệt, which opened in April 2008. In contrast to the sidewalk cafés and LGL, I now turn to a *les*-owned café, whose mission revolves around community organizing and community ownership. Café Duyệt is the *les* community's first establishment, whose policy since it opened until late 2009 was to turn away men, not including transgender men. In *les* webforums and through word of mouth, Café Duyệt is talked about as a place "just for *les*" (*dành cho les*). As one of the owners stated, "The purpose of the café is not just for business, but to create a place in which *les* can feel comfortable to be themselves, or organize events and programs for the community."⁵³ Since its opening, *les* café staff and community leaders organized yoga classes, singles' club meetings, theatrical performances, movie screenings, weekly karaoke, overnight holiday events, the opening ceremony of the LGL, and other "offline events" (*buổi offline*). The owners also lived in the café for its first two years, raising their infant daughter. Some *les* staff coming from the countryside to work in Saigon also lived in the café. Despite its community notoriety, the café struggles to balance its utility as a community space and the necessity of sustaining itself as a business. This tenuous balancing act reflects broader limitations of *đổi mới*'s economic opportunities, especially as the *les* community begins to "outgrow" Café Duyệt as the favored space for *les* events.

Several contingencies of state policies around business and urban zoning have both allowed and limited Café Duyệt's maintenance of an isolated all-women's enclave. There are no Vietnamese zoning laws that prevent private businesses from also being residences.⁵⁴ Many, if not most, business owners in Saigon live directly above or behind their business storefronts in the same housing unit. Although the mixture of public business and private home is not new to Saigon, Café Duyệt's location in a residential alley presents problems for sustainability. Café Duyệt's immediate neighbors are families that have owned their homes for

decades. The café's popularity in the *les* world is a conspicuous sight for disgruntled neighbors, especially when forty to fifty motorbikes roar into the alley for evening events. Neighbors noticed that only women patronized the café, suggesting that it was a "private club for dykes" (*một câu lạc bộ cho ô-môi*). Larger *les* events especially strained relationships with neighbors, who, upon collection of a vote, could petition the district's People's Committee for removal of the café's business license.

A *les* event in late 2009 resulted in the most severe police regulation of the café since its opening, significantly changing its "no men" policy and hosting *les* community events. After one neighbor had had enough of a loud party at the café, she called the local police. When the police asked the owner why there were no men in the café, the owners replied that they had no control over what kinds of guests come to the café. Without evidence that there were "social evils" harbored in the café, the police instead came down on the café's illegal use of the residential alleyway as a parking area, a growing problem for many Saigon businesses. Subsequently, the café turned its downstairs private room previously used for community events into a parking garage and opened up the top floor for private events. During events in 2009, *les* staff also dutifully brought motorbikes one by one to the parking area of the nearby People's Committee.⁵⁵ The committee sometimes acted as a parking garage for larger private events, such as birthday parties. Café Duyệt's "no men allowed" policy became a policy to "only allow men if the owners are home at the café, and seat them upstairs in the private area." This change did not lead to droves of men visiting the café.⁵⁶ However, *les* became more aware of the fragility of their attempt to claim space in the city.

In addition to state-enforced contingencies of the invisibility of Café Duyệt as a *les* space, the anonymity of the space was produced through a combination of controlled community knowledge and the choice of the café's location to meet this end. Knowledge of the café's exact address is contingent on participation in the *les* world. Café Duyệt customers must then navigate through an alley for a quarter mile to finally reach the café. From a business perspective, Café Duyệt's secluded location prevents ease of access and puts the café at a competitive disadvantage against businesses on street fronts or major intersections. The café's only sign is about the size of the numeral placard, but the sign does state that it is a *les* space. One of my informants reflected that the effect of this secluded location and lack of conspicuous signage prevented random passersby from merely happening upon the café. Online and offline, the café's name often became abbreviated to "CD," when *les* arranged to rendezvous there, further concealing its identity.

Entrance to the café is contingent on one's ability to perform membership

in the *les* community for the staff at the door. *Les* can enter based on outward appearance or affiliation with a community network. Staff deter men who approach by saying that the café was holding a private birthday party. Women who looked masculine, especially before unisex became a popular fashion trend, were less scrutinized than feminine-appearing women. When I asked staff members how they knew whether a guest was *les*, they replied that they ask guests how they know about the café. If they can name a specific individual or a *les* webforum, they may enter. The presumption is that the *les* community is so small, the staff could rest assured that women who could present such information above were indeed *les*. Social stigma drives *les* into isolation, but the exclusivity of the space also allows for freedom of community expression and organization. Brown argues, “Unlike straight venues, the closet conceals same-sex desire, but by doing so actually enables its practice.”⁵⁷ Inner circles of knowledge of the *les* community are considered so tight that the café’s environment is preserved based on a suspended faith in circulation of knowledge. However, these knowledges also reinforce social hierarchies of gender and friendship networks in the *les* world.

Since the café’s opening in 2008, however, the owner’s commitment to its original ideals has dwindled, reflecting broader tensions between maintaining the café as home, business, and community center. Because the café insists on an exclusively *les* clientele, the number of potential customers is already significantly smaller than other cafés. The owners compensate partly by charging slightly more than other cafés for drinks and snacks. However, this compensation reached extreme levels, which alienated the community. One veteran server said that during the café’s first year, the owners had raised drink prices five times over six months. Disillusioned with the management, the server quit. During my stay in Saigon in 2009–10, the staff changed every two to three months. Some complained that the wages were only half of other comparable work. Others complained that the owners’ restrictive management prevented them from expanding community projects or making simple improvements to the café, like turning on the air conditioning. Others disliked constantly confronting sour friendships or ex-lovers in a small community space. As a result of these multifaceted strains, some *les* have left Café Duyệt altogether or have attempted to organize community events elsewhere.

For Café Duyệt, contingent invisibility as a *les* space at state, public, and community levels has affected its infrastructural sustainability and its tenure in the community as the favored space of *les* events. In the past, a major NGO press event, LGL ceremonies, theatrical performances, and group meetings happened within Café Duyệt’s space, under the auspices and security that it was truly a

les community space. When *les* use Café Duyệt, the unspoken understanding is that they will always offer a portion of ticket sales to the owners or raise drink prices during the event. The run-down furniture, light fixtures, and generalized dinginess of the space are enough to indicate that the café owners could use the financial support. The gesture is based as much on financial considerations as it is on a presupposition of shared community. The mutual give-and-take coconstitutes the space as more than just a meeting place: it is a foundation from which to build community through sustained events. In contrast to sidewalk cafés or rented spaces for discrete *les* events, this café exists as a sustained environment for *les* socializing, community organizing, and in some cases, a home for *les* all at once.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world's debris.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Dust settles from the world's debris all around Saigon, especially as Vietnam embraces global capitalism at an ever-quickenning pace. Vietnam's admission into the World Trade Organization in 2007 spurred what some scholars consider a second period of economic transformation, after the 1986 *đổi mới* policies first opened the economy to global investors and bilateral trade agreements. Vietnam's postsocialist government orientation toward neoliberal reforms and globalization has also profoundly transformed Saigon's public culture, as the streets are turned "inside out" for commodification, leisure, and, for *les*, a space for the emergence of a community. This article has focused on a dialectical relationship between community and space in the construction of "the *les* world" (*thế giới les*), especially in relation to Saigon's specific urban landscape, where most *les* webforum members live and where most offline events are organized. As older *les* have testified, the active participation of *les* on webforums since the Internet appeared in Vietnam in the late 1990s sparked the emergence of the contemporary community.⁵⁹ This article has explored how *les* have organized offline, under some protection of the anonymity of mass crowding in streets, relatively new privately owned spaces of sport and leisure, and balanced the volatile mixture of private businesses and residential space for community organizing.

I have framed the dialectical relationship between *les* community formation and urban space under the rubric of "contingent invisibility," calling specific attention to how city life for *les* and the *les* community is composed of the collec-

tive and microcosmic interactions of individuals with one another and with the urban landscape. Contingent invisibility recuperates the productive possibilities of “invisibility” for community formation of a stigmatized population. After reviewing the literature in queer studies and feminist geography on the importance of visibility in political movements and urban communities, I have proposed contingent invisibility as a framework with which to understand the liminal space between public disclosure and passing that *les* occupy daily. I theorized contingencies of *les* community formation in terms of its dependency on state apparatus and control over urban environments and its strategic operation as invisible on a community level and for individuals. I have also used contingent invisibility as a double entendre, showing how the “contingent” becomes a “community” through a coproductive process of urban appropriation. Whether it is the ICOD bike riders wearing T-shirts in rainbow progression, nightly *les* gatherings in crowded sidewalk cafés, LGL’s mission as a community organizing event disguised as a sporting event, or the *les*-only café’s unique architectural design and community orientation, the contingent invisibility of the *les* community challenges the necessarily abject position of invisibility of a multiply subaltern population.

Notes

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1. International Coming Out Day is celebrated on October 11 in the United States and October 12 in the United Kingdom. Vietnamese *les* organizers choose October 10 for its roundness, and most riders were off work on Sundays. The event is also known as National Coming Out Day in the United States, where it was founded.
2. This *les* bike ride is referencing an event two years prior to the international headlines about Vietnam’s first gay pride parade in Hanoi in 2012. The *les* bike ride directly inspired the 2012 bike ride.
3. Kimberly Kay Hoang, “Economies of Emotion, Familiarity, Fantasy, and Desire: Emotional Labor in Ho Chi Minh City’s Sex Industry,” *Sexualities* 13 (2010): 255–72.
4. Hoang, “Economies,” 259.
5. All names of *les* organizations or individuals are pseudonyms.
6. *Les* use the term *come out* in English, although not always with the same connotation it has in the West. I detail more of the linguistic and symbolic differences elsewhere;

- see Newton, "A Queer Political Economy of 'Community': Gender, Sexuality, and the Transnational Politics of Community for *Les* in Saigon" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2012), 174–211.
7. Associated Press, "Demonstrators Hold Vietnam's First Gay Pride Parade," *Huffington Post Online*, August 5, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20120805/as-vietnam-gay-pride.
 8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
 9. Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 85.
 10. Gerard Delanty, *Community*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010). The first two Vietnamese *les* webforums were founded in 2001 and subsequently merged in 2003. This webforum is still the largest web community of Vietnamese and diasporic *les*, with some fifty thousand registered names. It is uncertain when the term *cộng đồng les* first circulated during these early years online. My oral histories with webforum founders suggest that the term did not circulate until a few years after the webforums garnered significant membership. "LGBT community" (*cộng đồng LGBT*) first circulated in 2008, when Vietnamese NGOs translated terms used in transnational grants for LGBT human rights projects that the VNGOs had received.
 11. Delanty, *Communities*, 158.
 12. Lisa B. W. Drummond and Mandy Thomas, introduction to *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1–18; David Koh, "The Pavement as Civic Space: History and Dynamics in the City of Hanoi," in *Globalization, the City, and Civil Society in Pacific Asia*, ed. Mike Douglass, K. C. Ho, and Giok Ling Ooi (London: Routledge, 2008), 145–74; Sandra Kurten, "The Transformation of Public Space in Hanoi," *ASIEN* 108 (2008): 67–79.
 13. My ethnographic fieldwork totaled twenty-one months in Saigon and Hanoi, including recorded interviews with eighty *les*, ages eighteen to sixty-seven. For more on my methodology, see Newton, "Queer Political Economy of 'Community,'" 59–110.
 14. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 98.
 15. Richard Tran, "From Red Lights to Red Flags: A History of Gender in Colonial and Contemporary Vietnam" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), xi.
 16. Frank Proschan, "'Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty': Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese (and French) Social Diseases," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002): 610–36.
 17. Newton, "Queer Political Economy of 'Community,'" 142.
 18. Newton, "Queer Political Economy of 'Community,'" 111–73.
 19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 171.

20. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
21. Andrea Brighenti, *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.
22. Although the Vietnamese government does not yet recognize same-sex marriages, Resolution No 110/2013/ND-CP on November 12, 2013, removed the provision in the Marriage and Family Law that explicitly prohibited same-sex marriage.
23. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 20.
24. Denise Tse-Shang Tang, *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 41.
25. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Huashan Zhou, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: Haworth, 2000); and Lucetta Kam, *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).
26. Evelyn Blackwood, *Falling into the Lesbi World: Desire and Difference in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010); Megan Sinnott, *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); and Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
27. On domestic and residential space, see Linda Peake, "Race and Sexuality: Challenging the Patriarchal Structuring of Urban Social Space," *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 11 (1993): 415–32. On commercial spaces, see Yolanda Retter, "Lesbian Spaces in Los Angeles, 1970–90," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay, 1997), 325–38; Alison Eves, "Queer Theory, Butch/Femme Identities, and Lesbian Space," *Sexualities* 7 (2004): 480–519; Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). On separatist spaces, see Moira Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 112–51; and Julie Podmore, "Gone Underground: Lesbian Visibility and the Consolidation of Queer Space in Montreal," *Social and Cultural Geography* 7 (2006): 595–625. On female homoerotic spaces, see Megan Sinnott, "Public Sex: The Geography of Female Homoeroticism and the (In)Visibility of Female Sexualities," in *Out in Public: Reinventing Lesbian/Gay Anthropology in a Globalizing World*, ed. Ellen Lewin and William Leap (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). On women's spaces that appropriate, see Ward, *Respectably Queer*; and Sinnott, "Public Sex."

28. Natalie Oswin, "Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space," *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2008): 90.
29. See Kath Browne, "Challenging 'Queer' Geographies," *Antipode* 38 (2006): 885–93; Catherine Nash and Alison Bain, "Pussies Declawed: Unpacking the Politics of a Queer Women's Bathhouse Raid," in *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices, and Politics*, ed. Kath Browne, Jason Lim, and Gavin Brown (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 159–80.
30. Oswin, "Critical Geographies," 96, 98–99.
31. Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 8.
32. Sinnott, "Public Sex," 235.
33. See Lisa Drummond, "Street Scenes: Practices of Public and Private Space in Urban Vietnam," *Urban Studies* 37 (2000): 2377–91; Koh, "Pavement," 145–74.
34. For more elaboration on *les* gender, see Newton, "Queer Political Economy of 'Community,'" 174–212.
35. I devote an extensive discussion elsewhere to the Vietnamese construct of gender and sex, called *giới tính*, especially in relation to Thai *phet* (gender/sex) (Newton, "Queer Political Economy of 'Community,'" 174–201). These constructs underlie conceptions of *les* gender B, SB, and fem.
36. Michael Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
37. Jakob Pastoetter, "Vietnam," in *International Encyclopedia of Sexuality Online*, ed. Robert Francoeur, www2.huberlin.de/sexology/IES/vietnam.html (accessed February 5, 2005).
38. A small number of traveling Vietnamese lesbian diasporics occasionally visit *les* spaces in Saigon, especially if they have *les* girlfriends or participate in the *les* web-forums. Since my fieldwork began in 2006, I have seen only two white women and one white man in a *les* karaoke bar. They were accompanied by other Vietnamese women.
39. Drummond, "Street Scenes," 2000.
40. Drummond, "Street Scenes," 2378.
41. Koh, "Pavement"; Kurten, "Transformation," 67–79.
42. Certeau, *Practice*, 184.
43. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
44. Drummond, "Street Scenes," 2000.
45. Drummond, "Street Scenes," 2378.
46. See Drummond, "Street Scenes," 2385; Koh, "Pavement," 163; Kurten, "Transformation," 71.
47. Koh, "Pavement."
48. Drummond, "Street Scenes," 2382; Koh, "Pavement," 163–65.

49. Socialist Republic of Vietnam, "Decree Issuing Regulations on Industrial Zones, Export Processing Zones, and Economic Zones," No. 29-2008-ND-CP, March 1, 2008. vbqppl.mpi.gov.vn/en-us/Pages/default.aspx?itemId=97ff5cc9-b896-482d-80ee-3fc19f8a5841&list=documentDetail.
50. From the author's ethnographic field notes for November 7, 2010.
51. One basketball team dropped out of LGL after discovering it was for *les*.
52. From the author's ethnographic field notes for November 10, 2010.
53. From the author's ethnographic field notes for December 7, 2009.
54. Socialist Republic of Vietnam, "Decree."
55. A different People's Committee (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân) sits atop Vietnamese administration at the district level of urban centers and ward level of rural provinces in the entire country.
56. The only time during my fieldwork in 2006–10 that I saw men in the café was when *les* and gay men put on a skit for Vietnamese newspaper reporters collaborating with an NGO on LGBT media representation.
57. Brown, *Closet*, 85.
58. Café Duyệt closed its doors quietly and unceremoniously in April 2012, because of the owner's disheartened unwillingness to pay exorbitant fines to the People's Committee and local police for raucous disturbances brought on by a few patrons.
59. Newton, "Queer Political Economy of 'Community.'"