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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

"This is not who we are": Freedom as Moral Affect and the Whiteness of Mutuality

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Abstract

This paper introduces the idea of freedom as a moral affect to demonstrate the contrasting ways in which different kinds of people expressed, understood, and experienced freedom. Through an ethnographic account of a design workshop in Vietnam, this paper reveals how freedom as moral affect serves as a cultural fault line that organizes conflicting desires for social relations. Moreover, this paper critically assesses the whiteness of mutuality as the ultimate expression of freedom.

Introduction

One hot morning in 2011, a large crowd of Vietnamese art students and designers gathered into a large auditorium at the University of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City. With anticipation and excitement, they waited in the stark white room for the European speakers to begin. The five guests

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came from Belgium, France, and the United States. They were members of a design collective, Free/Open Designers (FOD) who were committed to working exclusively with free/open source software.[1] Their approach to design was informed by a larger ethos of experimentation in freedom that combined the technical, the social, and the aesthetic. As part of their presentations, they wore blue aprons with the words "reclaim your tools." The aprons indicated their efforts to redefine freedom through techno-aesthetic engagements, playing on the metaphor of the kitchen and the cultures of sharing and reciprocity they imagined therein.

Free/Open Designers came to Vietnam as part of an event called "Open Design Week." Through this, I came to understand the breakdowns across two aspirations for freedom. Witnessing this breakdown made clear to me that freedom in the social worlds of software was not a value, not an ideology, nor discourse, but a moral affect. By this, I mean that freedom gives shape to the possibilities of feeling and desire. Freedom also establishes an affective limit to the authentication of certain desires over others. From the lens of moral affect, we can ask these questions. How does one come to sense freedom? How does one feel free? And how does one come to know it as something to be desired? Freedom as moral affect for the members of FOD comprised the pursuit of relations of mutuality through the cathartic communion of creativity. For those in Vietnam, the moral affect of freedom was much different.

"Open Design Week" was organized by Mai-Phuong, a Vietnamese entrepreneur. She ran a small technology company in her hometown in the Mekong Delta. The region is famous for its rice paddies, fertile farmlands, and floating river markets. This area stands in rural contrast to the urban cosmopolitanism of places like Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Mai-Phuong was not a developer nor a geek per se. Instead, she studied marketing at the university. She was energetic, well-spoken, and consistently impressed everyone she met with her affable confidence. During the years of my fieldwork between 2009 and 2011, she played an important role in organizing many of the free/open source software

events in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Her interests and passions for free/open source software were not for a love of technological mastery, but for a love of *cộng đồng*, or "community." The social worlds of free/open source software opened doors to a world of English-speaking cosmopolitanism in which she could rehearse a professional persona and experience the rushed intensity of encounter. Late at night, she would excitedly recount to me the interesting projects she came across, the new people she met. These whispered comments were often followed by additional musings on the possibility of political change in Vietnam.

In her capacity as a free/open source software enthusiast and evangelist, she was able to travel to conferences and gatherings in the United States, Canada, Belgium, Singapore, and China. Through participation in the social worlds of these technologies, she met people from all over the world and these encounters fulfilled a deep-seated desire to overcome the dislocation of where she lived. Of this place, she said, "You go up and down this street and you've seen it all. There's nothing here." I contemplated her dismissiveness as I sat on the back of her motorbike and watched the crowds of teenagers, friends, and families along the shadowy streets.

The social worlds of free/open source software provided a space in which people like Mai-Phuong could rehearse a cosmopolitan identity that permitted them to traverse the "nowhere" of their immediate world. For Mai-Phuong, freedom was not a technological materialization of values and ideals, but was a sensation and feeling. Similarly for other Vietnamese developers and aspiring entrepreneurs I met: freedom was an intense and concentrated affect of transnational encounter. At public events, Mai-Phuong translated freedom into the Vietnamese phrase *thoải mái,* an expression that connotes a sense of relaxation and easy-going comfort. Freedom in this regard was the sensation of authenticity without naked ambition in the expansion of horizons. The moral affect of freedom stood in contrast to a long cultural history that viewed transnational relations through the sobering *gravitas* of colonialism, sovereignty, and independence. The moral affect of *thoải mái* marked a distinct moment in

the tentative present of Vietnamese modernity in which young people like Mai-Phuong experienced that desire for transnational encounter as a release from an insulated geography and heavy-handed history.

A part of this feeling of freedom was an emphasis on cultural pedagogy. Mai-Phuong worked in various projects such as open textile and pattern production. She described these experiences as occasions for learning. “I want to learn more, I want to know more.” Moreover, this cultural pedagogy was something she hoped to impart to others. “If just one person finds this useful, then it’s worth it.” More precisely, the pedagogy of freedom did not refer to the acquisition of coding skills; it taught Mai-Phuong and others how to appropriately desire freedom and hence how to recognize and experience its atmospheres. For Mai-Phương, the feeling of freedom was the *frisson* of encounter. Freedom’s atmosphere included the intensity of cosmopolitan rehearsal as she stood in front of large crowds of people waiting to hear her speak. Freedom was the driving sensations of moving onward and upward, both figuratively and literally. Mai-Phuong had worked temporarily as an airline stewardess for several years to save up financial resources to pursue her freedom projects. She had also constructed a seven-story hotel on her family’s house plot. The building towered over her neighbors and the income she generated from this enterprise financed the pursuits that would give her freedom, projects to which she would return at later stages in her life.

More importantly, the cultural pedagogy of freedom comprised an imbibed common sense about a racialized hierarchy that placed Vietnam at the very bottom of a long ladder. As we drove around her hometown, Mai-Phuong continued to point out the various things she saw wrong with the place. One evening, we walked into a shop to buy dessert. As we left with our sweets, I breezily commented on how large the place was, a small kitchen and table occupied a small corner of very large tiled room. She quickly countered my offhand comment by insisting that houses in Vietnam were inefficient. She regularly peppered our conversations with complaints like this, describing the multitude of deficiencies she saw inherent to Vietnam: corrupt politicians, inept employees, dysfunctional

education institutions, toxic food systems, and many others. This pattern of complaint registered the ugly feelings of disappointment and annoyance that are intimately woven into the everyday ambience of modern life in Vietnam (Ngai, 2009). Mai-Phuong's complaints echoed a larger pattern of banter I heard in noodle stalls, tea shops, cafés, and office cubicles. The moral affect of freedom thus offered sensations of traversal that allowed people like Mai-Phuong the feeling of upward momentum and transcendence. Most imporantly, these freedom projects had the larger effect and affect of instructing racialized others how to be and feel in relationship to their worldly counterparts. Freedom coordinated and affirmed the feelings and forms of being within a racial hierarchy and taught people like Mai-Phuong their proper place in the order of the modern world.

"This is not who we are"

The moral affect of freedom patterns different kinds of desires and different imaginings for social relations. In contrast to the cultural pedagogy of hierarchy for Mai-Phuong, the moral affect of freedom for the Free/Open Designers collective consolidated desires for relations of mutuality based on a cathartic communion of creative passions. That morning at the University of Fine Arts, members of FOD elaborated on this mutuality through metaphors of domestic care-taking. To emphasize this semantic shift, they wore aprons on which were the words "reclaim your tools." Their design work included the practices of writing source code and developing new programming tools. They imagined themselves as lovingly sharing these digital tokens with colleagues, friends, and other members of their collective, that is, with an extended creative community. They likened such acts of creative communion to preparing and sharing fruit jam, even deploying tropes of familism to reaffirm the kinds of social relations they imagined taking place through their work with freedom and design. The moral affect of freedom for the members of FOD was thus a desire for mutuality. Open Design Week made apparent how freedom

could organize the patterning of desire toward divergent ends. For Mai-Phuong, this acute search for mutuality and communal belonging contradicted the forms of social hierarchy conferred through freedom as feeling.

This contradiction between freedom as hierarchy and mutuality was most evident when Mai-Phuong insisted that members of the FOD provide a technological demonstration for the Vietnamese students as part of the workshop. In the large auditorium, the collective's experimental approach was difficult for both her and me to translate, both literally and culturally. The Vietnamese audience had no idea about dingbats. They knew nothing about making fruit jam and its cultures of sharing. There were many moments of confusion like this. During one lapse in audience comprehension, Mai-Phuong asked the members of FOD to take a more pedagogical approach. Could they provide a "demo" of the software tools they used and built to teach the Vietnamese students? "Vietnam is not like Europe," she explained, "it's more traditional. If people don't see a demo, it won't be successful." Mai-Phuong was well aware that her request ran counter to the creative desires of FOD's members. The exercise of the demonstration was creatively retrogressive, requiring the European designers to instruct the Vietnamese students and aspiring designers how to navigate menus, load files, and click buttons. Upon hearing Mai-Phuong's request, they agreed to do so, but only with a reluctance that eventually gave way to a frustration that lasted for the remainder of their time in Vietnam.

One member later complained that "this is not what we do, guiding people through with a mouse. We're not into efficiency. I'm not used to being a teacher." For another, the position of being a teacher — and being in a hierarchically superior position — ran contrary to his desire for individual creativity, to experiment and to engage with what he described as "the idiosyncratic and the unexpected." Members of FOD struggled to wrestle back control during the remainder of their time in Vietnam to satisfy these creative desires.

For whom is the freedom of mutuality possible?

Software's tenacious power to captivate our imagination resides in the affective field of freedom, in how it impresses feelings of movement, upward and forward, toward transcendence. For the members of FOD, freedom was a sensorium of exalted belonging grounded in a communality of creative catharsis. Such desires, however, are grounded in a racial privilege of whiteness and invite us to consider for whom such freedom is, in fact, possible.

Previous scholars have shown us the extensive linked histories of this racial privilege and technoculture more generally. The Internet itself was founded on ideals of freedom and universality that assumed whiteness as the default social position for users (Nakamura, 2002; Senft & Noble, 2014). Such whiteness has continued through the growth of the Internet and social media as ideal "neutral" and "value free" spaces in which hard work and merit alone determine differentiation (Marwick, 2013). Nevertheless, as these technologies have evolved and changed, the undergirding norms of neutrality continue and have the broader effect of perpetuating and normalizing whiteness as the standard against which racially marked others must define themselves. We see this most visibly in the violent backlash against policies intended to promote inclusion, to bring race and gender diversity to technology corporations and online communities (Brock, 2011; Gray, 2012). The forced inclusion of people who depart from the norm of whiteness is seen as not only undermining the neutral, universal, and therefore objective space of technoculture but, more importantly, their presence in the name of difference taints and therefore undermines altogether the very integrity of the ideals of merit, neutrality, and universality.

In many ways, the kind of freedom desired by FOD marked a departure from the kinds of violent heteronormativity we see in other instances of whiteness in technoculture. Their use of aprons and metaphors of domestic housekeeping served to frame their design practices within a feminized vernacular. These efforts were based on a

larger objection to the masculine repertoires they saw within the free/open source communities more broadly. Nevertheless, this feminist intervention into technoculture still perpetuated a form of whiteness by disavowing the kinds of hierarchy that grounded Mai-Phuong's desires for freedom. Freedom as a form of mutuality is only possible for a privileged few, let alone mutuality through creative techno-labors of design and hacking. Members of the Free/Open Designers collective were unable to recognize the racialized quality of their desires for freedom. This hope for a union of equal and authentic selves working in earnest through creative endeavors perpetuated the same false equality that guided the early creators of the Internet.

Free/Open Designers' discomfort and final rejection of hierarchy stood at odds with Mai-Phuong's earnest desire to feel freedom through them. FOD were unable to undertake this burden of having to perform their expertise and privilege. Mai-Phuong's desire was for FOD to teach her and her Vietnamese friends how to join the ranks of modernity's "now"; FOD's final rejection of this racialized hierarchy was based on the false equality of mutuality. Described as "peer relations" in technoculture more broadly, such fantasies for flattened social relations insidiously mask the racialized structures of power that, in turn, naturalize mutuality as a desirable state of social relations. This simultaneously disavows other forms of collective belonging that might anchor ourselves in one another. From the experiences of FOD in Vietnam, we can clearly see that freedom in this moral affective grammar is neither legible nor possible for racially marked others on the margins of techno-modernity. Freedom as moral affect exposes the fault lines of technoculture to reveal the power that freedom affords. Moreover, this moral affect poses a pressing ethical and political question: How are we to arrive at each other and collectively be? Ultimately, what modes of relationality arise on technoculture's horizons?

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Notes

[1]All names used here are pseudonyms.

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Bios

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