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**Troubling Love:
Gender, Class, and Sideshadowing the “Happy Family” in Vietnam**

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Title:**Troubling Love: Gender, Class, and Sideshadowing the “Happy Family” in Vietnam****Abstract:**

Though socially and politically different, Vietnam’s Confucian, colonial, socialist and marketizing regimes share a common master narrative of ideal women as the moral bedrock of their nation: virtuous, self-sacrificing mothers. Drawing on ethnographic material collected in Đà Nẵng, I examine how women deploy discourses about ethical sentiments and national development to make sense of their experiences of love. I focus on women’s moral struggles with and reasoning about sacrifice and care to complicate understandings of romantic love as linked to capitalist individualism or modernity. Instead, I show how women subtly critique, yet remain committed to, forms of love that reinforce—through state policy and common practice—hierarchical gender, intergenerational, and class relations. This is achieved through the telling and living of sideshadowing narratives, i.e., subjunctive tales that invite contingency and contradiction. This non-teleological narrative practice reveals the precarious nature of ethical life and the ways love entangles political economy, moral sentiments and moral reasoning.

Keywords: morality and ethics; love; class and gender; narrative practice; Vietnam**TITRE :****Amour troublant : Genre, classe et indices autour de la « famille heureuse » au Vietnam.****Résumé:**

Quoique socialement et politiquement différents, les régimes confucéen, colonial, socialiste et de marché partagent un discours commun sur la femme idéale, fondation morale de la nation vietnamienne, en tant que mère vertueuse et sacrificielle. Sur la base d’une enquête ethnographique menée à Đà Nẵng, cet article examine comment les femmes vietnamiennes signifient leur expérience amoureuse à travers des discours sur les sentiments moraux et le développement national. En mettant l’accent sur les conflits moraux et les raisonnements sur le sacrifice et le *care*, il approfondit la compréhension de l’amour romantique en lien avec l’individualisme inhérent au capitalisme et la modernité. Il montre que les femmes critiquent subtilement—tout en y restant attachées—des formes d’amour qui renforcent, sous l’effet de politiques et de pratiques, des rapports hiérarchiques de genre, de génération et de classe. Cette critique est rendue possible par l’expression de discours latéraux et évolutifs (*sideshadowing*), notamment des récits subjunctifs qui évoquent la contingence et la contradiction. Ces pratiques narratives révèlent la nature précaire de la vie morale et l’enchevêtrement de l’amour avec l’économie politique, les sentiments moraux et le raisonnement éthique.

Mots clés : Morale et éthique ; amour ; classe et genre ; narration ; Vietnam**Tựa:**

Tình Yêu trăn trở : Giới, giai cấp, và ‘theo bóng bên lề’ gia đình hạnh phúc tại Việt Nam

Tóm tắt:

Mặc dù khác nhau trong khía cạnh xã hội và chính trị, các chế độ Khổng giáo, thực dân, xã hội chủ nghĩa, và thị trường tại Việt Nam có cùng một diễn ngôn chủ đạo về người đàn bà lý tưởng tạo thành nền tảng luân lý của dân tộc: những người mẹ đức hạnh và giàu lòng hy sinh. Dựa vào dữ liệu thu thập theo phương pháp điều tra dân tộc học thực hiện tại Đà Nẵng, tôi khảo sát cách phụ nữ sử dụng những diễn ngôn về cảm xúc đạo đức và sự phát triển đất nước trong cách hiểu của họ về tình yêu thương. Tôi tập trung vào những đấu tranh đạo đức trong cách họ lý giải sự hy sinh và chăm sóc nhằm phức tạp hoá cách hiểu về sự liên kết giữa tình yêu và chủ nghĩa tư bản cá nhân hoặc chủ nghĩa hiện đại. Thay vào đó, tôi cho thấy rằng phụ nữ phê phán một cách tế nhị nhưng vẫn hướng đến những hình thức yêu thương mang tính củng cố cho sự phân tầng về giới, thế hệ và giai cấp xã hội, thông qua các chính sách nhà nước và lối hành xử thông thường. Họ làm điều này bằng lối kể chuyện và sống ‘theo bóng bên lề’, nghĩa là những câu chuyện kể thuộc loại ‘phải chi’ để khơi gợi những khả năng về một hiện thực khác, về những ngờ vực và mâu thuẫn. Lối tự truyện phi mục đích này cho thấy tính bất định của đời sống đạo đức và những đan xen chằng chịt giữa tình yêu, tình cảm với kinh tế chính trị, cảm xúc đạo đức và lý giải mang tính luân lý.

Từ khoá: đạo đức và luân lý; tình yêu thương; giai cấp và giới; cách kể chuyện; Việt Nam

Manuscript:

Troubling Love: Gender, Class, and Sideshadowing the “Happy Family” in Vietnam

“I have a problem,” Hảo¹ whispered in English one night in March 2007, as we sat on her bed. “I can’t fall in love.” This was a true problem for my 25-year old friend. She told me she had several suitors, including English students in the cadre class she taught, and friends abroad. But she had never had a boyfriend.

Born to well-positioned parents whose families had both joined the Communist Revolution and returned to their natal Đà Nẵng only after North Vietnam’s victory, Hảo was well on her way to follow in her mother’s footsteps. She had an advanced degree in English from a foreign university, despite her war hero father’s earlier objections to learning the language of the enemy. She was favored by her superiors at work for her good family, work ethic, and tact. And she was pretty. In short, everyone agreed that Hảo commanded the Confucian “four virtues” of *công, dung, ngôn, hạnh* (*good work, appearance, speech, and behavior*) associated with “traditional” women and increasingly valued in “modern” ones in market socialist Vietnam (Ngo 2004:47).² Her parents had even bought a plot of land on which to build her a neolocal house upon marriage. Nothing stood in the way of Hảo’s success as a traditional-modern developed woman. Except for the fact that she couldn’t seem to fall in love.

To make sense of Hảo’s complaint, I draw in this article on one part of a larger research project in Vietnam, where from 2002 to 2008 I spent 18 months, largely in Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam, central Vietnam, studying sacrifice as an everyday, moral practice. Focusing on urban and rural multigenerational households, and using the lenses of language socialization (Duranti, Ochs and Schieffelin 2012) and person-centered ethnography (Levy and Hollan 1998), I discovered that “sacrifice” (*hy sinh*) is held up by individuals, families and the state as an ideal virtue that requires curtailing affective expression and silently embracing suffering for the sake of another.

It is premised on feelings of *tình cảm*, or visceral moral sentiments and emotions rooted in intimate material relations of care. Both *hy sinh* and *tình cảm* conform to the adage, *kính trên, nhường dưới*: *respect those above and yield to those below you*. While these sentiments help many in Vietnam avoid conflict by bridging class, gender and generational divisions, they also re-entrench inequalities through state laws and policies premised on this morality.

In this article, I focus on gendered relations of *tình cảm*, sacrifice, and moral personhood to answer one of psychological anthropology's recurring questions about the cross-cultural study of emotion: simply, *What's love got to do with it?* Here, I trouble what we mean by "modern love" and the ways it is typically linked to capitalist individualism or transcendent desire, by focusing on love's entanglement with ethics. In particular, I juxtapose public proclamations of morality that strive toward a *telos* of delimited norms, with personal "sideshadowing" narratives that embrace contradictory positions and articulate the contingencies of life.

Sideshadowing is a notion Ochs and Capps (2001) borrowed from two literary critics (Bernstein 1994 and Morson 1994) who over two decades ago sought to confront the problems implicit in teleological tales. These haunt both memory work narratives that foreground hindsight, as in *backshadowing* narratives of the Holocaust (e.g., "Jews should have seen the writing on the wall," Bernstein 1994), *and* narratives that are strongly ideological and imagine inevitable futures, as in *foreshadowing* narratives of progress and modernity (e.g., of the U.S.'s westward expansion as manifest destiny). *Sideshadowing*, by contrast, emphasizes open-endedness and subjunctivity, which lend narratives their world-making qualities (Bruner 1986; Good 1994; Samuels forthcoming). This way of analyzing narratives, I think, is especially sympathetic to the idea of ordinary ethics as developed in Lambek (2010) and Mattingly (2014), since here morality is conceived as something *more* than simply reproducing societal norms and

conventions. Instead, morality is better viewed as belonging to quotidian struggles for what may be incommensurable Goods: struggles that involve relationships and the mediation of the body, and also the mediation of discourse.

As ethnographers, we are well-positioned to capture the flux, and indeterminacy of ethical engagements, by focusing on the ways people struggle to be virtuous, especially when “doing the right thing” is not so obvious and outcomes remain uncertain. As I found in Vietnam, “love” entwines relations of *tình cảm*, *tình yêu*, and *tình thương* (*care-*, *romance-*, and *affectionate/pity-love*). Consequently, it seems wrong simply to pit spousal/romantic (horizontal) “modern” love relations in opposition to parent-child (vertical) “traditional” relations, since in daily life, these often intersect and converge, rather than simply conflict. I illustrate this by focusing on two stories of “love” where people temporarily withhold judgment and embrace contradictory positions. These stories expose compelling moments of generosity toward the circumstances of others, who must navigate volatile political and economic conditions as socialist Vietnam increasingly embraces capitalist reforms.

I begin with Hảo’s story, which introduces some of the contradictions entailed in Vietnam’s project of nationalist modernization and gender equality. Highlighting the intertwining of so-called modern “patriotic” and “companionate” forms of love, I suggest that Vietnam’s policy for gender equality in fact re-inscribes gender and class difference. I will next set aside Hảo’s case to analyze An’s story of her neighbor, cô Thu, to further reveal the role of class disparities in Vietnam’s public moral discourse about love, and to illustrate how attention to sideshadowing narratives expands our understanding of moral experience as it is lived. Returning to Hảo’s story in the final sections, I will illuminate love as a moral process that

unfolds over time in sideshadowing (and thus open-ended) ways that allow people to stake tentative claims over what or who is important to them and how they matter to one another.

Through these two stories of family devotion and the moral perils of care, I propose that love is not simply an event (cf. Zigon 2013). Love instead is better understood as a process conjoining both so-called “traditional” (vertical) relations between kin, and “modern” (horizontal) relationships between partners. Subjects who love, then, are not simply pursuing individualist goals of self-fulfillment that typically index “modernity.” Their love involves at once morally acting, sensing, feeling, and reasoning in the world – a world of affective ties with others. Emotion and judgment, “intimacy” and material provisioning are entangled here, revealing how experience, and likewise affect, action and cognition, are simultaneously bound up, with uneven consequences for differently positioned subjects in Vietnam’s development projects.

In highlighting how love entangles political economy, moral sentiments, and moral reasoning, I direct psychological anthropologists’ attention to *narrative practice*, as this allows the intertwining of multiple layers of ambivalence and nuance to be revealed. Here, ethics and morals do not stand above or apart from the messiness of life, but are woven into the very fabric of living and loving (Das 2012), as I show through the sideshadowing narratives and lives of Hảo, An, her neighbor, cô Thu. I begin by first relating Hảo’s story to scholarship that continues to deconstruct developmentalist tropes long questioned in anthropology (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1993; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Kuper 1973).

Modern Traditional Development and the “Happy Family”

Scholars in recent decades have continued to question the dichotomy often drawn between “modern” and “traditional,” “developed” and “under-developed,” “secular” and “pious.”

Mahmood (2005), Deeb (2006), and Fader (2009), for example, show how non-liberal Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women engage in practices of piety and “modesty” that are to be understood not as signifiers of women’s oppression and cultural “backwardness,” but as modes of mobilizing cultural constructions of “tradition” to confront changing social conditions and cultivate “modern,” virtuous selves within their communities. Leshkovich (2014) shows how women in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam similarly subscribe to, and mobilize to their advantage, essentialist discourses of gender and piety formerly denigrated by the Communist state as “backward superstitions.” Women draw on these “traditional” tropes to provide for their families and thereby embody market socialist modes of “modern,” virtuous sociality. Decades of colonial rule, anticolonial and anti-imperial struggle, socialist revolution, and now efforts at market liberalization have brought with them various projects of “modernization” and “development” in Vietnam that can appear both continuous with, and yet dissimilar to, one another in their attempts to claim legitimacy at home and on the world stage (see e.g., Phinney 2008; contributors to Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012). This makes it hard to date “modernity” or to determine what “exactly” the term signifies, though Wardlow and Hirsch’s (2006:4) framing of “individualism, commoditized social relations, and narratives of progress” as key dimensions accompanying companionate marriage and modernity is a helpful starting point. This is in line with recent gender, intimacy, sexuality, and globalization scholars’ assertions that love is a complicated affair, at once locally variable, and globally patterned. It can involve both pleasure and closeness, and commoditized and instrumental relations, both among the lovers and in relation to their broader context (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Padilla et al. 2007; Cole and Thomas 2009).

Three main markers of “development” in Vietnam include: first, the adoption of a Romanized script and nationalist mass literacy campaigns³ that resulted in an over 90% reading and writing rate among both women and men, placing Vietnam close to par with other “developed” nations (Nguyen and Dao 2008; UNICEF 2015). Second, family planning efforts instituted in late 1986 to limit couples to birthing no more than two children have now led to “replacement-level fertility” (Gammeltoft 2014; Nguyen 2011; World Bank 2015). And most significant are constitutional reforms that at least since Vietnam’s 1946 “Law on Marriage and the Family” have asserted women’s “equal rights with men in all spheres” (Wisensale 1999). For the last half-century, socialist laws designed to “liberate” women from their “traditional” Confucian Three Submissions (to their father, husband, and eldest son) have sought to integrate women into the workforce and eliminate “subordination”, for example by outlawing polygamy and wife-beating, forbidding men from divorcing their pregnant wives, and granting women special rights and privileges, including paid maternity leave, sick leave for childcare, and earlier retirement than men (Wisensale 1999:604).⁴

Though intended to legislate “equality,” these reforms in effect also naturalize and re-entrench difference.⁵ Premised on the “traditional” Confucian morality the government sought to overthrow in the 1950s, but revalorized since the 1990s, they place greater burdens on women than men to regulate their fertility and ensure compliance with biopolitical state goals aimed at uplifting the “quality” of the population. In foregrounding women’s “natural” tenderness and self-sacrificing virtue, while declaring the family as the enduring basic “cell of society,” both the laws and public discourse surrounding them essentialize women’s association with and responsibility for the family’s well-being and happiness, leading to uneven consequences for women themselves.

Family happiness in turn is equated with the nation's success and development, first in the socialist bloc as against the "evils" of capitalism, and now in the capitalist world itself (Phinney 2008). As the chairwoman of the Vietnam Commission for Population, Family, and Children declares in an article tellingly entitled "The Vietnamese Family in the Cause of National Industrialization and Modernization":

... the family is always a sweet home, a primary environment in which virtues are born and nurtured and the Vietnamese personality created. [...] precious traditional values [...] such as love for the country, solidarity, industriousness ... resilience, [and] undauntedness ... have been kept up and developed by the Vietnamese family throughout the history of national construction and defense. (Lê Thị Thu 2004:4, quoted in Gammeltoft 2014:62)

Here as elsewhere in official discourse, the family is framed as the originary locus of happiness, patriotism, and national solidarity, a timeless virtuous institution that upholds Vietnam's progressive march forward, while avoiding corrupting individualism.⁶

Of course, not *all* Vietnamese affiliate closely with state proclamations or take them seriously. But Hảo's privilege stemmed specifically from her family's connection with state agencies, where they served as ministers and salaried employees. Both her grandmothers had entered love marriages decades earlier and migrated North with their husbands to raise Revolutionary children; upon their return to Đà Nẵng with the Communist North's victory, they were happy—and at times exerted efforts—to see their grown children find lovers with whom to raise patriotic families not blemished by unsavory affiliation with the South. Companionate love marriage and patriotic love of one's nation, for Hảo, thus were linked through the practices and ideologies of her exemplars. Finding love was part of continuing to be modern, patriotic, and worthy of privilege. This is not because companionate marriage was unique to the socialist North or capitalist South, as both warring sides (and likewise Vietnam's subsequent regimes) saw

themselves as “modern” and industrializing via different paths (Phinney 2008). Rather, we see here that marriage based on “love” need not be linked to the pursuit of capitalist individualism, and that affective bonds can at once encompass nation, family, and individual love.

Searching for Love

Seen in this light, the opening vignette, of Hào’s trouble accepting someone’s love (a necessary first step to birthing and raising the next generation), indexed a deep existential dilemma. She expressed despondence because she was failing her elders, she told me. Her family could not be happy without her finding love. Feeling pressed to live up to public moral conventions she had been raised to embrace, Hào began to discipline her actions to try to reorient her sentiments, to be able to fulfill her cosmological, nationalist, and filial obligations. And her mother, friends, and supervisors quickly mobilized over the course of the year to help Hào find love.⁷

For example, despite her own busy schedule, Hào’s cadre mother traveled with Hào to far-flung Buddhist temples and other shrines to meet fortune teller after fortune teller to discover when a suitable match would materialize, and how. Upon one soothsayer’s advice, the house furniture and decorations were all rearranged to change the *phong thủy* (*feng shui*) of the place. And in addition to juggling two jobs, Hào herself—with her supervisors’ blessings—regularly made time to go out with her single friends to palm and tarot card readers who might divine the identity of her future companion and father of her children. These seemingly superstitious acts denigrated under high socialism as feudalistic and futile tradition, ironically now were excusable, and even embraced, by Hào’s family of Communist cadres, to ensure their own continuity, and her happiness (*hạnh phúc*), as a virtuous middle class woman. And Hào evidently acquiesced,

seeking romance and its presumed attendant happiness through “traditional” channels rather than individualistically on her own, e.g., at bars that could risk tarnishing her reputation.

The type of happiness sought, I learned, was more a protean family affair premised on essentialist gender assumptions coupled with ideologies of equality (and women’s double shift), than a companionate project of “pure” intimacy between women and men (Giddens 1992). “Everlasting Happiness” (*trăm năm hạnh phúc*) was really a formulaic blessing given to all marrying couples. It entailed caring and being cared for (Borneman 1997), and involved interlocking webs of cross-generational responsibilities that were at once asymmetrical and reciprocal.

As I argue elsewhere (Shohet 2013), asymmetrical reciprocity entails differing obligations and debts that reinforce bidirectional but differentially manifested care. It assumes not a liberal, autonomous subject of individual desire, but disciplined hierarchical interdependence. Toddlers learn this even before they learn to speak, through language socialization routines such as bowing to elders and using honorifics. These are premised on a Confucian understanding of the boundless, un-repayable debt (*on*) children owe their parents (especially mothers) for giving birth to them and enduring hardship uncomplainingly to provide material care and support for them throughout life. And the expectation is that children will in turn show respect to parents and materially care for and support them as they age.

The type of personhood assumed here is akin to Lambek’s (2010) ethical subject and Zigon’s (2014:22) Heidegger-inspired Da-sein: it involves being enmeshed in relationships constitutive of your and others’ worlds.⁸ And because hierarchy is paramount in Vietnam, asymmetrically reciprocal care throughout my research was glossed as part of sacrifice (*hy sinh*),

and as the essential building block of the virtuous “happy family” (*gia đình hạnh phúc*) steeped in *tình cảm*.

This construct of the “happy family, prosperous and secure nation” (Figure 1) itself was an official state campaign that rhetorically equated family happiness (a “private” sentiment) with the public good – the nation’s security and prosperity.⁹ It went hand-in-hand with the demonization of women’s extra-marital sexuality, especially the sex work of lower-class women, as described by Nguyễn-võ (2008), Gammeltoft (2002) and Rydstrom (2006).¹⁰ Standing in opposition to vilified materialist promiscuity and the criminalization of prostitution, drug use, and HIV/AIDS as part of the “campaign against social evils” (*tê nạn xã hội*), idealized constructs of wifhood-motherhood are held up in Vietnamese institutional and public discourses of morality as exemplars of family happiness, development and virtue.

[PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE]

But what if the opposition between virtuous wifhood-motherhood and vilified materialist promiscuity doesn’t quite hold up in the personal narratives of Vietnamese women? This, after all, is what anthropologists have taught us to expect: ideologies—like lives—are contingent in practice, and hegemony is never complete. As Foucault (1979:13) elucidates, power relations are *historical* developments, not easily effaced through individual acts of “resistance.” What ordinary narratives can do, is point to the incompleteness and multiple ironies involved in relations of power and domination, and how these implicate class positions.

Inconsistency becomes especially apparent in “sideshadowing” narratives,¹¹ which again, are co-narrated, multiperspectival, open-ended accounts of events and conditions. Privileging the ambivalence and uncertainty of experience as lived in the moment, sideshadowing illuminates Zigon’s (2009, 2014) “assemblage” theory of the moral constitution of subjects, whereby

personal moralities can be at odds with, if inflected by, official discourses of morality. To illustrate how the practice of sideshadowing refracts love in relation to class and state, I momentarily leave Hảo's telos-seeking story of searching for love, to recount An's contradictory narrative of neighborly and motherly love.

Love, Sideshadowing the Nation, and the Violence of Equivalence

I recorded An's story on a dreary, wet Friday in October 2007 in Đà Nẵng. It was one of many such days where I spent visiting her mother, Bà Bẩy's, newly constructed alleyway house. Punishing rain had been pouring down nearly every day for over a month, soaking you to the bone. Just the previous night, five flood-related deaths in the area were reported in the news. Every family I had been visiting that month seemed slightly on edge, sad, depleted. Nerves felt palpably raw. And today, there was a funeral proceeding in the alleyway, adding to the gloom.

An, who had resisted marriage and motherhood till nearly age 40, was as usual sitting at her mother's ancient sewing machine, waiting for piecework to come in. Even more than before marriage, she struggled now to make ends meet and feed her toddler son from her meager earnings. Often, she relied on handouts from her brother and nieces, since her sweet but financially unsuccessful husband was chronically under-employed and had to attend to his own ailing mother.¹² Yet despite these hardships, An told me she was glad she had not married the American her friend set her up with to leave Vietnam. She explained that by marrying her own husband, who had long ago courted her, and with whom she shared affection rooted in mutual understanding and sentiment (*tình cảm*), she could still be near her mother and family.

Today she was sad, but not miserable like her mother's alleyway neighbor, cô Thu. Clucking her tongue with pity and repeatedly whispering the compassionate phrase, *tội họ* (poor them), An explained that cô Thu had just lost her drug-addicted son to AIDS. Late that morning,

An had returned from a brief visit to the grieving house to pay her respects and donate a sum of money to the mourners. In this way, she and other visitors affirmed the bereaved mother's suffering and continued social belonging in the community, morally constituting themselves as people who care.¹³

No one, An told me, would carry the coffin, except the paid pallbearers. Neighborhood men, normally available to do this work, all declined, fearing infection. I probed An further on how AIDS is transmitted, and she explained that infection only comes from the exchange of blood. Buddhist nuns and NGOs care for patients, and paid men bury them, she elaborated. Moral pollution is elided here as infection, I thought: its dangers averted through charity or hired work, with debts seemingly discharged through monetized means.

Returning to the particularities of her neighbor's case, An next recounted how cô Thu's son had grown up poor and father-less. Cô Thu had been left to care for him and his sister, who has since married and borne children of her own. Her trajectory represents a normatively good life, and implicitly suggests that improvident death was only one of a number of possible consequences following Cô Thu's husband's demise after he returned home from a Communist "reeducation" camp. Her fate is concordant with often contradictory, yet also consistent Confucian, colonial, socialist, and marketizing logics that valorize motherhood across classes and political regimes. It contributes to the sideshadowing quality of An's story, where fates do not inevitably result from dire conditions, or dire conditions are not necessarily the punishment meted to "immoral" people.

Love and Family Unhappiness: "I see it and I feel I pity her"

As the rain stopped for a while, An next darkened the plot. She recounted how cô Thu had worked as a prostitute after her husband passed away, to support her two orphaned children.

This was at a time when Vietnam was “opening up” to the non-socialist world and its “new” forms of affliction and work. But An parts ways with Vietnam’s official vilification of drug-use, AIDS, and prostitution in trying to make sense of her neighbor’s tragedy. Instead of condemning these “evils,” she repeatedly uses the syntactically optional first person pronoun *mình* to emphasize her own personal sympathy for her neighbor, or to invoke a non-identified collectivity (the community in general) that, unlike the state, does not view the neighbor as immoral. An’s meta-agentive discourse, or way of talking about her neighbor’s actions (Ahearn 2010:41), constructs an account in which cô Thu’s profession became a foregone conclusion due to no fault of her own, and, possibly, due to the lack of options for widowed women, especially those affiliated with the former South. An speaks fast here, mumbling, as though voicing an ongoing train of thought:

| | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| that situation is what seems so pitiable ... | cái hoàn cảnh đó thấy tội lắm ... |
| because [even if she] worked an ugly trade | dù có làm xấu chi |
| now looking at her situation | mà chừ thấy hoàn cảnh |
| I/we pity her/it breaks my heart | mình cũng thương, |
| certainly [I/we] don’t hate ((<i>inaudible</i>)) | chứ không có ghét (...) |
| I/we don’t find her contemptuous (.) | mình không có ghét (.) |
| I/we see it and I/we feel I/we pity her. ((<i>pause</i>)) | mình thấy mình thương. |
| given that [her] husband died early | chừ rằng chồng chết sớm |
| what was she going to do? | thế làm chi? |
| she had beauty, | bà cũng có nhan sắc, |
| she was pretty when [she was] young ((<i>mumble</i>)) | bà cũng đẹp hồi trẻ (...) |
| at the time in her 20’s, 30’s | hồi mà hai mấy ba mươi tuổi |

she was pretty so she could work (as an escort) bà đẹp bà mới đi làm (gái/mới) được
only because she was pretty could she make money bà đẹp mới đi làm tiền được

Women, An implies, were particularly vulnerable: with few opportunities available to her, the neighbor had to rely on her good looks to profit from “an ugly trade.”

An’s mother, Bà Bảy, likewise offered an account that absolves cô Thu of some blame for her son’s corruption and ultimate death. An had earlier suggested that the son had become profligate because he had come into too much money too quickly, *but*, Bà Bảy added, when his mother tried to beat him for neglecting his studies, as any good parent should (deploying the adage, *thương con cho roi cho dọt ((vọt)), ghét con cho ngọt cho ngào* “if you love your children cane and whip them, if you hate your children indulge them with sweets”), his paternal grandmother had intervened, crying, *tại sao mà giết cháu ta, mà giết cháu ta* (“why are you killing my grandchild? You’re killing my grandchild!”). In preventing her daughter-in-law from disciplining the boy, it was the grandmother, not the devoted mother, who had set the stage for the youth to go astray, but again for understandable reasons: she empathized with his loss, which was also hers.

The grandmother’s (and mother’s) “immoral” abandonment of discipline was in the name of moral love. Their contested actions now (as then) prompted an ethical debate, enacted through Bà Bảy’s interjections. She quoted their hot words directly, as if re-living the event, turning An’s story into a co-telling narration, with no easy resolution. This is paradigmatic of sideshadowing narratives, which invite debate over questions such as, *Who is to blame? When and how did the problem start? Why?*

Morality here is revealed to be contested and contradictory, and it is through the narrative pondering of events that An and Bà Bảy confront incommensurable goods, similar to their

neighbor cô Thu and her mother-in-law in years past. Moral value is not to be reduced to the logic of accounting applied when assessing economic value (Lambek 2008): as in other recent accounts (e.g., Garcia 2014; Han 2011), where drug addiction intersects with loving acts between spouses or parents and children, the provisioning of care can also effect moral harm, depending on the temporal scale and perspective from which events are viewed.

Repeatedly and in accruing layers that unfolded in the immediacy of their telling, An and Bà Bãy narrated their neighbor as someone who never stopped worrying about, materially caring for, and loving her son. Cô Thu had prostituted herself and beat him to make him study harder and cultivate an ethical character. Later, she worked for his release from jail, and next sold everything and became poor again, just to buy the medicines he needed once he fell ill with AIDS. As a good mother and loyal widow, cô Thu had never stopped sacrificing for her son, while also deferring to and supporting her late husband's mother. And as a final act of love, she managed to assemble a ritually appropriate funeral, arranged despite her yet again impoverished state, to accord with local norms of respect for the dead and ensure her son's comfortable transition to the next world.¹⁴

Asymmetrically Reciprocal Love

In this account, the bereaved mother is cast as embodying and remaining virtuously faithful over time to the principle of asymmetrical reciprocity. And just as An frames AIDS as non-infectious yet polluting, she and Bà Bãy express contradictory principles in telling the neighbor's sideshow story: that being a good mother rendered her a victim of circumstance. In acting as an ethical subject who continuously conformed to, reproduced, and reinforced culturally exalted norms of femininity as virtuous loving motherhood, cô Thu paradoxically transgressed public institutional morality. Her unhappiness and even tragedy appear spawned by

a clash of sentiments, child-rearing traditions, failed reciprocity, and poor conditions. In the course of pondering her life through their joint sideshadowing narrative, An and Bà Bày conclude that cô Thu deserves their care, or at least empathic acknowledgement of her grief and misfortune. As for the son and his transgressions, perhaps out of respect for his as yet-to-ascend-ghost, they remained more reticent, locating culpability in a diffuse elsewhere rather than condemn him as the conduit of “social evils.”

In attending not just to the content, but also to the form and moment-to-moment unfolding of the narrative as it is told, we witness the *process* by which moral sentiments produce and are intertwined with moral reasoning, leading subjects to “simultaneously take into account moral norms, practice ethical reflection, and consider the consequences of their acts” (Fassin 2014:433). This involves not calculative reason divorced from emotion, but rather sentiment through moral reason and reason through moral sentiment, striving at normative yet contested virtues. And this is a recursive process, leading An to engage in further ethical reflection through narration, where she goes on to recount her own dire circumstances, gush about her family’s support, and voice her uncertainty and worry over her own son’s future. As her story crescendos, it is not An’s son Von’s material wellbeing that she expresses anxiety over, but his *moral* status, as she practically cries, her voice ascending from soft whisper to voluble plea:

who can know in advance huh,
who can know in advance:
[if] the husband dies early, [or] the wife dies early
then my child here will be rotten or not
how can [we] know?
only after [he] grows up,
then if [he’s] rotten or not rotten

only then can [we] know.
like now [when] he's still young::
like I'm raising little Von
I do think about whether he's rotten or not
how can [we] know?
gradually as he grows up
I'll teach him this and that
only then will I know, right?
It's not possible to know.
Now [we] cannot confirm
if my child cannot be rotten
or my child is rotten,
I cannot know in advance.

An's plea is filled with lyrical repetition characteristic of ritual oratory (Keane 2006), yet it constructs an open-ended sideshadowing future filled with doubt. She wonders how her young child will turn out despite all her efforts. And in recounting others' beneficence, An posits the ontology of caring kin as an anchor, but not a guarantee, for living the good life.

Care, in her accounts, is concretized in material relations, such as the supply of milk and meat for her son that she had just enumerated to me in exacting detail. But this is not the sum total of care. As in the case of the AIDS victim, care is also something less tangible, such as family love, which had also prompted the neighbor to stop short of nothing to try to save her son. Unsuccessful, and knowing full well that he had not been liked by the community, cô Thu had nevertheless arranged a proper burial for him. And while men refused to help carry the coffin to its final resting place, women like An *did* contribute money to the bereaved neighbor so that she could carry out the ritual in its proper form. After an unhappy life, the son might at least rejoin the ancestors. Or maybe less cosmologically ambitiously, the bereaved mother could rejoin the

moral community of her neighbors, who do take pity on her rather than shun her for her son's sins, and who respect her for the care, sacrifice and devotion that she continued to commit to him despite his having turned "rotten." Seen in this light, the money An lacks herself, yet that she still gave her neighbor, was *not* a way of ending the relationship, but an invitation to continue it. An's payment was not a means of discharging, but affirming moral debts, through the vehicle of (modern) money.¹⁵

As An's narrations imply, love along the vertical axis of familial relations involves ethical judgments and moral choices that deeply entwine "modern" concerns (e.g., of work, livelihood and disease). These acts of love hardly follow precisely linear or preordained rule-following obligatory acts aimed at instrumental exchange sometimes associated with "traditional" communities or a "morality of reproduction" (Robbins 2007). Affective bonds that at times are entangled with public prescriptions here appear to motivate action, as they do in what we typically consider romantic love relationships (e.g., Ilouz 2013; Jankowiak 2008; Lindholm 2006). And so, to further reflect on the intermingling of "tradition" and "modernity" and the various intersecting layers of love and exchange, I leave An's narrative here, to conclude Hào's story. There, we shall see what I came to understand as Hào's pondering the possibility, from her perspective as a grown child, of turning "rotten," and the steps she took to prevent such an unhappy fate.

Models of Love and Sacrifice

Hào remained boyfriend-less as the year progressed, and was increasingly absent from home. Often, this was attributed to her demanding job as an English teacher, in addition to her appointments with tarot card and palm readers, whom she visited with her friends. I wondered, too, whether her younger sister's courtship with a colleague didn't rankle Hào a bit, as he

increasingly spent time in their home. But Hào didn't explicitly express jealousy. As she'd told me, she didn't see having men take an interest in her as a problem; what she struggled with was how to feel more than platonic *friendship* toward one of them. "*Yêu không được*" (*I can't love*), she complained to me when describing her various male friends.

By April, Hào had become fast friends with a 31-year old single woman, Bình, whom locals defined as an old maid (*ế*). Hào told me she wanted to avoid Bình's fate, and so together, they were both in search of a partner. They had met through Hào's former English tutor, whom they respectfully addressed with the honorific *cô* (*teacher*) Mai, but interacted with as a peer.¹⁶ Underscoring the slippage in "traditional" and "modern" modes of relating to people through their forms of address and pursuit of middle-class "leisure" (aimed, after all, at securing a mate), the three frequently joked with each other as they cruised on their new mopeds, or sat at upscale cafés, sipping strawberry shakes and munching on roasted watermelon seeds. A mate, for them, was *not* a necessary component of financial security, but he could promise or endanger participation in the broader moral community of intimacy, marriage and reproduction.

Mai was a beautiful, always well-dressed, cosmopolitan-looking single woman in her forties who maintained a long-term relationship with a married man. She doted on his grown sons and frequently accompanied him to events while his shy and more matronly-looking wife almost invariably stayed home. To my apparently prudish mind, Mai seemed a strange choice for a chaperone in the event of possible dating, but she was close with Hào and a good friend of Hào's mother. And Hào's mother was also a longtime friend of Mai's lover, who was also one of Hào's bosses. Love, marriage and sex clearly were entwined and entangled here.¹⁷

In due time, both Hào and her mother privately (and separately) explained to me that Mai's relationship embodied "sacrifice" (*hy sinh*) on the part of all three involved in the love

triangle: the two lovers for not being able to marry or act on their love, and the wife for tolerating and accepting the situation. Mai, in her caring love for a married, high-ranking, privileged man, was in this moral economy *not* a prostitute – unlike cô Thu, who had also been attached, An told me, to a well-to-do lover. Mai instead was regarded, alongside her companion and his wife, as a virtuous sacrificing person.

In sideshadowing fashion, Hảo’s circle of friends evidently tolerated some ambiguity and fluidity in relational configurations, even while abiding by the constraints of conventional moral institutions that do not readily welcome divorce or extramarital liaisons. Love, they implicitly accepted, is not delimited by marriage, but ideally should lead to and flourish inside it. For Mai, the union of love and marriage was not possible, condemning her to a life of “sacrifice” and childlessness; but like Hảo’s kith and kin, she was working to help Hảo find a way to connect the two by meeting a suitable mate. And because she tutored many influential professionals in the now-desirable English language, Mai was able to gather useful information for Hảo about suitors’ backgrounds.

As the months passed and Hảo remained single, her grandmother and aunts subtly voiced their concerns. Then in October, things came to a head, when Hảo’s grandmother landed in the hospital for several weeks. Following one hospital visit, my friend seemed unusually despondent and pale. Her concern, she confided, extended beyond her worry about an ailing, beloved grandmother: it was because this normally patient and nurturing Grandma had now warned Hảo that her ghost could not rest easy were she to die before a husband and grandchildren were on the horizon. Faced with this sinister prospect,¹⁸ Hảo redoubled her efforts to at last fall in love. Moral sentiments and reasoning, it seemed, would have to unite to guide her actions and discipline her heart. Quietly, without the knowledge of most of her family, she began to have

alternating coffee outings with two of her pursuers, and sometimes with both together in a group, always in the company of Bình, Mai, or other friends.

The two suitors, she noted a couple months later, were similar. Lâm was a handsome architect with promising future income ahead, and a family living close by. Kiên on the other hand was a former student and fellow instructor at her university, also handsome and with a promising career. Earlier in the year, Hào had shunned him, but he had persisted. Through Mai's reconnaissance, Hào learned that not only was his family pedigree unobjectionable (they had supported the Việt Công and the North during the war), but there was an added bonus: his widowed father lived with Kiên's married older brother in neighboring Quảng Nam. This would mean that if married, Hào and Kiên would not bear primary responsibility for Kiên's parents, as typically required in Vietnam's still patrilocal kinship system (Gammeltoft 1999, 2014; Rydstrom 2003). Nor would Hào face the prospect of caring for an ailing mother-in-law, as her own mother had had to do till Hào's paternal grandmother finally passed away. Loving Kiên could afford Hào a degree of freedom in both the immediate present, and the projected future.

Love's Sideshadows

I present these details as though they were part of Hào's rational, linear calculation. But this was *not* how she talked about the two suitors when we chatted in early January, as she was finally getting ready to make a choice. After having gotten to know both for some time, Hào was still undecided, and regarded the two men as two possible (and similar) roads toward the future. Love, she appeared to conclude, was not simply the force of individualistic if intertwined passion (*tình yêu*): less like "eros" and more like "agape", it more importantly had to involve deeply felt *tình cảm* that extended beyond the feelings between lovers, to the sentiments shared between them and their families and friends.

Tình cảm, as we now see, is the Vietnamese moral sentiment of care and concern for the other out of mutual affection and attachment. Rather than delineate a sphere separate from economic or material relations, *tình cảm* is rooted in a local model of the self as inter- rather than independent of others. Hào, then, was searching for a partner with whom to share *tình cảm*, to preserve and build on, not disrupt, the *tình cảm* that she already had with her family.¹⁹

Increasingly since mid-December, Hào seemed happier and more at peace, and not just because her grandma was out of the hospital, or because the rainy season had ended. Through joking and bantering, preferences were expressed, and *tình cảm* was developing. Hào smiled and giggled more, and was even more frequently absent from home. By mid-January, when one day Hào lay home, ill with a cold, her and Kiên's mutual love could no longer be kept a secret. He had shown up at her door to see how she was doing. Blushing, she at once began to invite him to her family's home, so that her parents could meet and decide to approve or torpedo the choice.

A new phase had now started, in which she and Kiên regularly went on coffee dates with Hào's mother to ensure compatibility and to make the union official. By early February, Kiên had also "dated" and been approved by Hào's maternal aunts, who agreed that he was a good choice ("*có tình cảm*," "he has *tình cảm*," they reasoned). As I was getting ready to leave Đà Nẵng in late February 2008, Hào did not appear (to my American sensibilities) "madly" in love. Yet I sensed marriage was on the horizon and was mindful that in less than two years, Hào's mother would reach the age of 55, Vietnam's mandatory retirement age for women. She had often said she'd then be ready to care for new grandchildren, while Hào could continue to develop her career.

Laws promoting and protecting women's rights, especially reproduction, mothering and grandmothering, were on Hào's side. These are in place to facilitate the formation of stable,

working, multi-generational, traditional-modern families – families who did not need to rely on Vietnam’s shadow economy, as had An’s neighbor. Commanding comfortable means in the new economy can evidently help women be simultaneously good subjects, mothers, and citizens.

To some, Hào’s loving a man who was not saddled by a nearby demanding family, and whom her family further approved, may appear like quite a rational and calculating sentiment. While some might interpret her lack of florid and demonstrative passion as indicative of cold instrumentality, I am less sure. Is such a display necessary to signify passion and participation in “modern” forms of love? Or do our understandings of “modern love” (or even “love” generally) need to be reframed?²⁰

More intriguing to me is the extent to which Hào seemed to attain freedom from disapproving natal and affinal kin, perhaps ironically through the “traditional” means of complying with societal and familial demands that she find a decent man to marry and love. Labels like “traditional” and “modern,” “passionate” and “calculating” do not fully capture the complex intertwining of sentiment and material exchange involved here.

Coda: Narrative Interpretation and Living in Love

The couple were married in October 2008 and moved into Hào’s old house where she had grown up. Her younger sister continued to be courted by the same boyfriend for almost two more years before finally marrying him, while Hào went on to give birth to a baby son in early 2010. In contrast with An’s bereaved neighbor’s son, Hào never came close to turning “rotten.” She dutifully and happily found a mate to love and with whom to build their mutual careers and family, clearing the way for her parents to retire in peace, her sister to marry, and her grandmother to dote on yet another generation. Their family, unlike An’s neighbor, was not beset by financial difficulties and conflicting childrearing ideologies following untimely death and

questionable connections. Their class and political affiliations had helped ensure family harmony in line with Vietnamese state goals.

Hảo's search for love can seem quite "traditional" in that she appeared motivated by a powerful desire to please her family and live out a normative destiny for contemporary, as well as older generations of women. She had resorted to even "superstitious" means by which to find love, or alternatively secure an instrumental union with a man she could conveniently care for and be cared by. As I continue to follow her story from afar, the two seem happily married, together accruing social and economic capital to support their only son.

Because she was not very demonstrative in her relationship with Kiên, one could wonder if Hảo's love was simply "bought," with social acceptability substituting for "authentic," "passionate," or "pure" intimacy once she reached the age and stage at which to marry. I cannot answer this, but I also believe that such questions are more ideologically relevant for those who privilege an autonomous, self-governing subject, instead of the relational moral subject anthropologists have been positing for quite some time – subjects motivated by multiple, entangled concerns. I prefer to refuse this reductive interpretive move, and insist instead that we ethnographically attend to the multiple moralities informing subjects' being-in-the-world over time, as An modeled in her narrative of her neighbor cô Thu.

In tracing Hảo's story of success in romantic love as against the "failure" of maternal love recounted by An about her bereaved neighbor, we see life and love unfold over time. They unfold in ways that at once are constrained by structural, material conditions, including laws that reinforce entrenched class relations; but also, for the people experiencing these, life and love remain open-ended and uncertain. Rather than present their trajectories as foregone conclusions, I have followed my study participants' lead in elucidating how living morally or pursuing "the

Good”²¹ can at first blush appear like a coherent project: that of forming an intergenerational, harmonious family that shares “love” horizontally between spouses, as well as vertically between parents and children. But as their sideshadowing stories also attest, this is far from a linear process of merely following social conventions out of a feeling of obligation, or what Robbins (2007) terms a “morality of reproduction.” Instead, moral lives are contingent and precarious, adhering to multiple forms of “what’s at stake” that can result in tragedy or trouble, in addition to family happiness.

Vietnam’s marketizing regime and integration into the world economy may encourage companionate unions and romance, but also ongoing relations of maternal, filial, and neighborly sacrifice and cross-generational love. Market relations thus constitute problematic terrains in which to engage in various love relationships that shape and are shaped by people’s class positions. One consistent strand across these and other cases I followed is the relative backgrounding of men and idealization of women’s unfailing devotion to their family across classes and generations. State discourses and policies uphold and capitalize on this, and in this way reify gender roles and relations while advancing the myth of a unified, undifferentiated nation marching forward toward modernization. Meanwhile, the horizontal vector of inter-spousal relations, like the discourse of “individualism,” remains, in stark contrast to Yan’s (2003, 2009) findings in China, conspicuously absent in my corpus. But these hardly signify lack of “modernity,” necessary “resurgence of tradition,” or even “piety,” and rather merit further investigation and theorization of the ways that gender ideologies reinforce class positions, and how marketization reinforces both, by commoditizing an idealized vision of “tradition.” The stories I have recounted here, of romantic love arguably blossoming out of filial love for a dying grandmother (and facilitated by a woman engaged in a long-term affair), and maternal and

neighborly love expressed through material relations of exchange and asymmetrical reciprocity, invite us to answer recent scholarly questions such as, “Where is the love?” or “What’s love got to do with it?” (Lambek 2015) with *everywhere, a lot, and in complicated layers*. Love, I conclude, is neither just a mask for cold calculation or transcendent emotion, nor reducible to “modern” horizontal or “traditional” vertical forms: instead, it is the nexus at which ethics and cultural politics play out, as revealed in sometimes fleeting, sideshadowing narratives.

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List of Figures:

Figure 1. A roadside propaganda billboard proclaiming: “secure people, prosperous nation, happy families”.

Endnotes:

¹ All personal names are altered to protect confidentiality. See below and Shohet (2013:213n1) for a discussion of the larger study's research methods and sample.

² *Mô-đern* is loosely synonymous with “modern,” i.e., indexing “with-it” and middle-classness akin to the usage reported by Fader's (2009) Boro Park Jews. After US-backed South Vietnam was defeated by the North in 1975, the nation unified under the Communist Party and established a centrally planned, collectivized economy where only some were eligible to become cadre servants of the state and enjoy attendant privileges as a result. Vietnam embarked on a series of liberalizing and privatizing reforms since 1986, to become a “market economy with socialist orientation” (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*, or “market socialism” for short). Consistently ranking among the fastest growing economies in Asia since the late 1990s, it has spawned an arguably new urban middle class composed of (often overlapping) state cadres and entrepreneurs with access to foreign and domestic material, social, and symbolic capital (Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012).

³ Though originally developed by Catholic missionaries in the 17th century, the *quốc ngữ* (literally, *national script*) was not made the official orthographic system in Vietnam until the early 20th century when the French ended the traditional mandarin exams, leading to a mass decline in Traditional Chinese (*chữ Hán*) literacy, which in any case had been largely confined to the ruling elite; an even smaller portion of the population commanded the script's Vietnamese derivative, *chữ Nôm*. Literacy became much more widespread with the script's adoption by Communists and other nationalists who saw it as an especially effective tool at spreading anti-

colonial propaganda. For a summary and discussion of various historical accounts of these developments, see Shohet (n.d.).

⁴ Similar laws are advocated by ethics of care feminists to counter the excesses of “development”, but in Vietnam, they were supposed to make the nation *more* “modern” and “developed.” Far from presenting a unified theory, ethics of care theorists like Tronto (1993), Nodding (2003), and Held (2006) differ on the legislative measures and grounds underpinning them, particularly whether to advocate “difference” or “equality”; their debate is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁵ It is based on this logic that posits women’s “natural,” biologically-given difference from men, that Ortner (1974) explained the persistent and arguably universal subordination of women to men across cultures and societies. Ortner (1996) has long since distanced herself from her original postulated dichotomy and its universalist claims. Nevertheless, her early formulation of this “(sadly) efficient feedback system” (1974:87) whereby physical, social, and psychological aspects in every society lead to women being seen as closer to nature than men, and as mediating or ambiguously standing in between nature and culture, remains useful for understanding how seemingly “empowering” ideologies and practices can also devalue and demean women. Her theory in turn helps explain why real social change would not take place unless and until both social institutions and cultural ideologies were to change substantially and simultaneously.

⁶ See Yan (2003, 2009) for scathing accounts of “individualism” as a product of state socialism in China. A key difference between Vietnam and China is that it is the family, rather than the individual, who is the target of reform in Vietnam. By contrast Yan suggests that in China, the family was dismantled as an institution after the 1949 Revolution, giving rise to a toxic

“incomplete and uncivil individual” in the decollectivization and following marketization eras, leading to rampant self-interest, isolation, and anomie reminiscent of Durkheim’s and Weber’s characterization of Europe’s industrializing populations a century earlier (2011:224).

⁷ In Vietnamese, to search for and to find a lover are one and the same: *tìm người yêu*.

⁸ Lambek (2010:60) explains that moral personhood involves being always already entangled in relationships that make up our being, as he elaborates: “we come to be persons ‘under a description,’ hence ethical subjects, precisely by means of such nominations or interpellations, performative acts that begin even before we are born.” In short, persons find themselves born into roles and in relationships, which they actively work to maintain and care for by caring for others (see also Garcia 2014; Willen 2014). Responding to Geertz (1973), Hollan (1992) likewise articulated this version of self as not unique to so-called ‘sociocentric societies.’

⁹ Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2010) critique such equations that harness people’s “private” affects to exert disciplinary power in the name of “public” good, a “good” that suppresses and mandates against tolerance for difference. Under high socialism, similar equations were made when valorizing the egalitarian justness of patriotic fervor over feudalistic adherence to lineage and hierarchy or selfish, bourgeois capitalist individualism (Nguyen 1998; Pettus 2003)

¹⁰ Hoang (2015) adds that recent years have witnessed high-end sex work in Ho Chi Minh City being used to help facilitate and cement development projects and foreign investment deals that the State and local elites see as key for Vietnam’s prosperity and global ascendance. This has led to the decriminalization of sex work in high-end and mid-tier bars, even as street work remains stigmatized and subject to police sweeps and prosecution. Bribes to the police by lower-tier bar owners who cater to Western businessmen or to budget travelers (Western backpackers),

respectively, in turn allow Vietnamese sex-workers to attract smaller amounts of capital in the form of “remittances” from men moved not by stories of Vietnam’s modernization, development and success, as at the upper-tier bars, but by maintaining their fantasy of Vietnam as a poor, third-world country with destitute women in need of saving.

¹¹ I borrow this term from Morson (1994), who uses it to describe Dostoevsky’s crafting of such open-ended, multi-perspectival, morally indeterminate narratives; elsewhere (Shohet 2007, forthcoming), I elucidated the role of this narrative genre in constituting “struggling to recover” experiences among self-starving women diagnosed with eating disorders.

¹² An’s form of work and reliance on family rather than public support may readily be used as evidence of the uneven and iniquitous results of Vietnam’s marketizing “neoliberal” reforms; yet she recalls even more dire poverty under the collectivization period, and like many others in my study does not express nostalgia for that regime. See Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) for a critical examination of “neoliberalism” in Vietnam, and Schwenkel’s (2013, 2015) contrasting elderly northern subjects in Vinh city who do rail against the nation’s present economic reforms.

¹³ As Thomas and Cole (2009) elucidate, the ideological separation of sentiment from material (monetized) exchange may be a legacy of European colonialism and missionizing Christianity rather than a universal characteristic of human affective relations. I elaborate on this theme later in this essay.

¹⁴ For accounts of the ritual management of death in Vietnam’s changing political economy, see Malarney (2002); Kwon (2007); Shohet (n.d.). The mother and daughter’s co-narrated accounts also resemble the moral tragedy and care that Garcia (2014) highlights in her accounts of kinship and drug addiction in New Mexico.

¹⁵ This relational form of love-care contrasts markedly with the anonymous, biopolitical form of care critiqued by Stevenson (2014), and speaks to money's diverse, not always anonymizing uses and meanings (cf. Bloch and Parry 1989; Graeber 2012).

¹⁶ See Sidnell and Shohet (2013) for an analysis of the challenges (linguistic and normative) posed for Vietnamese who might want to minimize the hierarchies of age or rank between them.

¹⁷ Lindholm (2006) suggests that the linking of romance with marriage and sexual relations is a relative anomaly when considered across documented cases in the anthropological record over time.

¹⁸ See Kwon (2008) on the ongoing haunting by ghosts of war in the province, and Shohet (2010) on contemporary people's engagements with the ancestors to prevent haunting ghosts' unwelcome visitations.

¹⁹ Other couples faced similar considerations. For example, I knew Buddhist and Catholic young women who pined after a lost connection with a would-be spouse based on presumed religious or class incompatibility, and others who converted or were shunned by the extended kin when they married despite these objections. Tran (n.d.) recounts the suffering of dejected lovers in Ho Chi Minh City, some of whom claim, unlike the people I knew, that *tình cảm* is increasingly a "traditional" sentiment of the past.

²⁰ As one reviewer helpfully noted, this raises a paradox akin to Schneider's (1984) critique of kinship; anthropologists have indeed long debated the universality or particularity of (romantic) love (see, e.g., Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Jankowiak 2008; Lindholm 2006; Cole and Thomas 2009; Venkatessan et al. 2011).

²¹ Zigon disputes equating morality with actors' "aims at 'the good' or attempts 'to do right'" and suggests that we instead locate morality "in the social world" through a phenomenological situating of subjects in relation to "the various aspects of ... institutional and public discourses, as well as embodied moralities" that "emerge in moments of breakdown" (2014:17-18). The two stories presented here may be described precisely as such "breakdowns" that nevertheless reveal the pursuit of rather monistic goals of affirming "fidelity" to being in and forging relationships with others.