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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Learning to See the City Again: Ethnographic Visions of Gender, Class, and Space in Ho Chi Minh City**

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Ann Marie Leshkowich. *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$55 (cloth), \$25 (paper).

Kimberly Kay Hoang. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. University of California Press, 2015. 248 pp. \$65 (cloth), \$30 (paper/ebook).

Catherine Earl. *Vietnam's New Middle Classes: Gender, Career, City*. NIAS Press, 2014. 320 pp. £50 (cloth), £18 (paper).

Annette Miae Kim. *Sidewalk City: Remapping Public Space in Ho Chi Minh City*. University of Chicago Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$45 (cloth), \$7–36 (ebook).

And all of it—all of these areas of Manchester—was divided up into football pitches and rugby pitches.... I remember all this very sharply. And I remember, too, it striking me very clearly—even then as a puzzled, slightly thoughtful little girl—that all this huge stretch of the Mersey flood plain had been entirely given to boys. (Massey 1994, 185)

In her important essay “Space, Place, and Gender,” first published in 1992 and later reprinted in an influential book by the same name, the feminist geographer Doreen Massey reflects on the spatial divisions of labor in Manchester, England, in order to highlight the way that space is “gendered through and through” (Massey 1994, 186). Her examples are local, even personal, but the insight is relevant to contexts far beyond England. For example, reflecting on the passage cited above, I am compelled to note that I, too, have long been struck by how hard it is for a puzzled, slightly thoughtful person walking through Ho Chi Minh City not to think “that all this

huge stretch of the ... flood plain had been entirely given to boys.” If you walk or ride through the streets at dusk and onward into the night, the sidewalks of the city often seem given over to men—one sees them drinking wildly, chugging beer in competitive games, and in many cases surrounded by women whom they happily and unabashedly objectify. In some parts of the city, whole sections of prime roadway have been overtaken by goat meat restaurants, entirely given to men, or, as the Vietnamese themselves might call them, “old goats.” It is worth quoting a bit more from Massey’s essay, because her words are essential for understanding at least part of the way Ho Chi Minh City and a good many other cities work:

The only point I want to make is that space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live. (Massey 1994, 186)

Massey’s observations about gendered space should be on any scholar’s mind as he or she attempts to understand life in any city. Her goal is to help us see space in new ways, to train our eyes to imagine what spaces might look like if we didn’t take place for granted.

Massey’s text is especially important because she insists that the specific entanglements of space and gender need to be studied in particular cultural contexts. Spatial and gendered relationships are not static, but always emerge from dynamic lived relationships among people and the world in which they live. These relations, in other words, cannot be fully understood from a quick walk through town, but must be contextualized and historicized. Once we recognize that space is “gendered through and through,” the next task is to see what is occluded by our first impressions. If large swaths of the city are given over to boys, where is everybody else? If I look at a map, what is it *not* showing me? What might we see if we looked at those other places in the city and talked to people in those places? Even in the goat meat neighborhoods, surely other things are happening. It can’t just be old goats eating goat meat specials and nothing else.

In addition to looking at gendered space, then, understanding a city requires considering the dynamic relationship between the seen and the unseen. And in order to understand this relationship, we need more than preconceived pronouncements about how the city works, or about how gender and class work on space. Rather, we need rich, fine-grained ethnography that traces the dynamic intersections of gender, space, and class in a city. To do such ethnography

properly requires peering beyond the surface appearances of the city and listening intently to the everyday lives lived within it. The four new ethnographic perspectives on gender, class, and space in Ho Chi Minh City discussed in this essay all offer ways to see the city again. Three of them do this by looking at class and gender, and one does it by rethinking how we make maps; two of them are by anthropologists, one by a sociologist, and one by an urban planner. But they share one thing in common: all of them hone their keen vision with the aid of ethnography.

In *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*, anthropologist Ann Marie Leshkovich develops a sophisticated framework for thinking about gender essentialism and the role it plays in the lives of female traders in Bến Thành market, Ho Chi Minh City's best-known marketplace. Leshkovich, who first visited the market in 1988, conducted two years of intensive ethnographic fieldwork among female cloth traders in 1995–1997, and then followed up with the same research informants in 2003–2004, 2007–2008, and 2010–2011. The result of this patient and sustained scholarship over roughly two decades is not only a rich portrait of female traders in the city's most famous *chợ* (marketplace), but a sensitive analysis of how their lives have been entangled with the symbolic associations and meanings associated with the market and its traders over time.

The book is thoughtfully and clearly organized, moving through history and contemporary ethnography in an extended effort to explain a straightforward observation that Leshkovich continually grappled with during her fieldwork: although the traders in Bến Thành market are clearly strong-willed, agentive people, they actively participate in the construction of reductionist and, in many ways, derogatory gender and class essentialisms about themselves and other female traders. Put simply, they readily reduce themselves to stereotypes and caricatures. Traders repeatedly asserted that women were naturally better traders than men; they said that the marketplace was a woman's domain; and they routinely repeated largely negative stereotypes about market traders as insignificant economic actors engaged in small-scale, non-modern, "traditional" or even "backwards" or "uncivilized" forms of trade.

Leshkovich was rightly skeptical of these gender essentialisms, and one of the book's important contributions is to trace the historical, politico-economic, and social contexts within which different constructions of gender have been produced. For example, by examining the early history of the market, she shows that Bến Thành was not originally conceived as a traditional market at all, but was in fact constructed as an icon of colonial civility and modernity

by the French. When it was completed in 1914, both the French- and Vietnamese-language press in the city celebrated the market for how it would deliver civilization and progress to the city. Clearly there is nothing inherently “backward” or “traditional” about the way the market operates. Furthermore, the tumultuous history Leshkovich tells of the market’s postwar movement through socialist collectivization and later into the market economy also shows that none of the behaviors and practices in the market came about naturally. Even today, the market is run by a management board and influenced by representatives of Vietnamese mass organizations: there is a complex bureaucratic structure regulated by decrees from the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee, and there is an elaborate tax and fee system regulating commerce, as well as a vibrant market in the stalls themselves, which have become a kind of real estate in their own right.

Gender, class, identity, and everyday trading practices are all constructed in relation to a regulatory landscape that has constantly changed throughout the market’s history. During the high socialist period that followed the end of the Vietnam War, the market was forcefully integrated into collective forms of production and distribution, which altered how business was carried out. And the period since the introduction of market reforms in 1986 has been a long sequence of constant policy changes and negotiations, all of which have required transformations in the way traders conduct their business and how they present themselves as social persons. In telling this history, often through the captivating life stories of traders themselves, Leshkovich’s point resounds clearly and forcefully: the market practices, behaviors, and gender essentialisms of traders are not natural essences but rather the product of the history and social interactions that she so carefully details.

But the book does not stop with simple myth busting. Leshkovich’s major contribution to anthropological theory and to our understanding of gender in Ho Chi Minh City lies in how she shows what these gender constructions *do* for people, and how they play a role in identity formation. In the process, Leshkovich offers an important methodological lesson for anthropology that is worth quoting in full:

The desire to locate and celebrate subversion or debunk essentialism risks ignoring a central tenet of ethnographic research: to take seriously the statements of our interlocutors as meaningful and significant descriptions of the world as they see it. This does not mean that anthropologists should gullibly accept everything that people say. It does, however, remind us not to rush to prove such

statements false, especially when they are said repeatedly with conviction. Instead, we think with them. We consider why certain ideas are uttered, what they mean to the people voicing them, and how they percolate in social interaction to shape other words, deeds, and possibilities. In short, we analyze such statements as socially real and personally meaningful. (8)

In other words, while it may be true that the kinds of gender constructions that anthropologists have long sought to deconstruct and denaturalize are not primordial facts of nature, they do have very real effects on the world. Even social constructions can be “socially real.” Furthermore, the act of tracing the history of a constructed gender ideal does not mean that it is necessarily a top-down construction imposed on hapless women who then become unilaterally oppressed by these constructions, nor does it mean that the only source of agency to be found is that wielded by those who reject essentialism. Instead, people play with their appearances, sometimes wielding essentialism as a form of agency.

“Faced with the uncertainty of market socialism,” Leshkovich notes, “traders performed and narrated identities that seemed to correspond to official, essentializing stereotypes of them as small-scale, backward, weak, and marginal. Through words and deeds, they reproduced these essentialisms” (21). Leshkovich calls these powerful articulations of gender the “political economy of appearances” (21), a useful term that she develops into an important theory of how essentialism can be part of a larger identity performance which enables people to both deal with and manage the politico-economic constraints and historical contexts within which they find themselves. Describing “savvy management” and “performative and rhetorical strategies,” Leshkovich’s ethnography explains how some forms of gender essentialism work much like the “strategic essentialisms” famously described by Gayatri Spivak (1988)—where subalterns deploy stereotypes normally used to denigrate them as powerful strategies to subvert their domination. But Leshkovich argues that these essentialisms also have staying power, and that they are not purely manipulations. To loosely paraphrase George Orwell, they may wear a mask but their faces sometimes grow to fit it.

This concept of the “political economy of appearances” has relevance well beyond the case of Bến Thành market. Leshkovich demonstrates that essentialisms can have pragmatic value and that managing appearances sometimes enables people to carve out livelihoods in a world that is often stacked against them. To show how identity, appearance, and political economy are all entwined with one another, for example, Leshkovich analyzes the historically

shifting ways in which “the family” has been integrated into state concepts of economic behavior and how market practices have responded. By deploying the ideology of family, traders were both able to play the role of cultured family sometimes demanded of them by the state and also able to use the label of “family business” to deflect state attention from their entrepreneurial activities. “Being seen by officials, customers, and other stallholders as a small, family-run business dominated by women was the safest way to stave off suspicion that one had made it big (*làm lớn*)” (91). In other words, constructing a successful entrepreneurial operation as a “family-run business” offered a way to fly under the radar. The very idea of the family is itself a strategy for negotiating the complexity of the market economy in a late socialist state. This “strategic familism” (96) is another aspect of the political economy of appearances.

Similar observations apply to the construction of class. Income levels might lead purely quantitative observers to see some of the most successful traders as members of the middle class. But class, as Leshkovich shows, is not just a rung on a ladder of relative wealth; it is a project of social self-fashioning, tied to income but also, as other scholars have noted, to consumption, spending, and lifestyle (see discussion of Earl, below). Leshkovich shows that it is more than that as well. Class is a mode of living in the world, linked to how people are seen and to how they see themselves, as well as to how they perform their identities in public and private spaces. Class, when it intersects with gender, politics, and history, is managed like the political economy of appearances and also, it would seem, of *disappearances*. In Ho Chi Minh City, class is never fixed but often fades in and out of view:

In the 1990s, middle classes in Ho Chi Minh City seemed everywhere and nowhere. Everywhere, because Honda motorbikes, recently renovated homes, upscale cafés, and imported fashion testified to an urban middle class on the rise... [N]owhere, in that people tended not to identify as middle class (*giải cấp/tầng lớp trung lưu*). Instead, they talked about being modern (*hiện đại*), having enough to live (*có đủ sống*), being civilized (*văn minh*), having culture (*có văn hóa*), or being appropriate (*phù hợp*). (175)

Precisely! This description of class in Ho Chi Minh City is perhaps one of the most innovative and accurate descriptions currently available in the literature on Vietnam. As with the way they strategically deployed gender identities, traders managed class identities by engaging in “dynamics of spectacle and concealment” (181), a brilliant turn of phrase that encapsulates the way Ho Chi Minh City residents control what others can or cannot see about their wealth and



achievement. In some cases, traders could climb the class ladder through their acts of consumption and spending, but in others, they could also downplay their success by highlighting themselves as small traders. “Nearly all the traders I met,” Leshkovich recounts, “described their production activities as poor and small-scale in ways that seemed to reflect a coherent and conscious strategy of classing down” (185). She adds that by “rhetorically highlighting slackened sales, performatively emphasizing the femininity of petty trade, and creatively accounting, traders portrayed themselves as struggling to get by” (187). Leshkovich situates this dynamic relationship of concealing and revealing as a legacy of socialism and suggests that the classification of people often determined how they were treated by the state. Indeed, after reading her accounts of traders’ life stories, it becomes clear why the traders would carefully construct their appearances: state regulation has often hinged on assumptions about what the traders are, so managing appearances is a strategy of state evasion. Traders often remarked that, in their business, it was necessary to know how to “talk nonsense” (*nói xạo*), a term they used to explain why they might inflate prices to start a bargaining session, but that can also mean to stretch the truth about one’s identity, play a role, lie, or otherwise skirt around the truth. Encountering a steady barrage of “nonsense” from the state for the past forty years, it makes sense that traders have developed their own sophisticated forms of talking nonsense in reply.

These are important observations, because they show how the thoroughly gendered concept of the social person and the social unit is intimately tied to political and economic changes in society at large, and vice versa. (This is also what Massey means when she says, in the passage quoted above, that “this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live.”) In the Vietnamese case, the fact that a person’s identity can determine the nature of interactions with government authorities has produced a lot of hedging and caution in how people represent themselves to the state (and also, it seems, to other citizens). In most studies of Vietnam since the 1980s, “the economy” is depicted as an abstract, disembodied force that lives primarily in the minds of policy makers and planners (what the Vietnamese language calls *kinh tế*). In contrast to such detached accounts of “the market economy” (*kinh tế thị trường*), this ethnography’s focus on the subtle experiences of people working in a *marketplace* (*chợ*) (distinguished from the market) during this period is one of the most thorough accounts of the social effects of Vietnamese market reforms available. By the end of the book, it is clear just



how illuminating it is to study the market economy through the lens of the marketplace. For anyone wishing to understand how a shift to a market economy plays out in human terms among people most intimately involved in actual market activity, *Essential Trade* is essential reading.

If it appears that the cloth traders of Bến Thành have cornered the market on “talking nonsense” and managing the “political economy of appearances,” they may well have met their match in the women we encounter in sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoang’s equally insightful ethnography of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* is based on extensive ethnographic research in four different niche markets of the city’s sex industry. It challenges the notions that the industry is driven by Western clients and that sex workers are all passive victims of sex trafficking by showing how integral the industry is to Vietnam’s economy, and how many sex workers are in fact savvy entrepreneurs who perform and embody carefully managed forms of sexuality that cater to specific kinds of masculinity. (The term *savvy*, interestingly enough, appears in both Leshkovich’s and Hoang’s books, and captures important facets of both arguments.) Like Leshkovich, Hoang weaves her ethnography into a complex framework that ties gender and class performance into the broader story of Vietnam’s political and economic transformation in the post-reform era. Although the authors do not engage with each other’s concepts directly (the books came out at nearly the same time, and neither author cites the other), it is remarkable how both come to make very similar arguments. In both cases, the ethnography unambiguously demonstrates that gender is an embodied performance, crafted and remade in relationship to political economy. Furthermore, the malleable essentialisms of embodied gender performance are not just strategies that benefit the women involved, but are essential to the workings of the Vietnamese economy at large. This latter point becomes especially clear in Hoang’s thesis about the direct connection between political economy and the intimate labors of sex work.

The topic of *Dealing in Desire* is arresting and the book is destined to gain a wide readership. Furthermore, not only is the fieldwork impressive, but the arguments are provocative and well substantiated. During seven months of ethnographic research in 2006–2007, fifteen months in 2009–2010, and follow-up trips in 2008 and 2012, Hoang worked alongside hostesses and bar girls in four different bars catering to different clientele. Despite the complexity of the research, Hoang’s argument is straightforward: sex work in Ho Chi Minh City is a space where

Vietnamese elites assert themselves as the leading vanguard of a rising Asia, and where Vietnamese American and Western men negotiate their own anxieties about perceptions of Western decline in the face of the global shift in wealth. Hoang describes in vivid detail how sexuality, money, manhood, global politics, history, finance, race, and desire all intersect in complex ways with geopolitical change. She shows how sex workers and “mommies,” the English term Vietnamese use to refer to madams, cultivate gendered performances to navigate these intersections. In each bar, she depicts how workers employ different “technologies of embodiment” (129) and perform different kinds of femininity to cater to different kinds of male desire. By doing so, they deploy their sexuality and gendered subjectivity in deliberate, entrepreneurial ways. Hoang’s argument is especially powerful because it emerges through rich ethnographic description that juxtaposes the very different kinds of gendered performances in the four very different bars.

The most exclusive of the four bars, which Hoang calls “Khong Sao” bar, caters to elite Vietnamese businessmen and their foreign, primarily East Asian, business partners looking to invest in the country or to engage in lucrative business endeavors. In this bar, elite Vietnamese men seek to perform their own masculinity in front of other elite Vietnamese and mostly East Asian investors, which in turn helps them to facilitate business deals and increase foreign direct investment. Hoang describes male forms of ostentatious spending and extravagant tipping of women, and also shows how the women play into these displays as facilitators, skilled in cultivating the masculine bravado of the Vietnamese elites. In this way, the women fulfill a fundamental role in building the impression of Vietnam as a country on the rise, a place worth investing in. This impression suggests to investors that anything might be possible in Vietnam, as long as one had the right connections. For those who “seek to bypass many of the bureaucratic hoops to obtain land and permits through informal social networks,” Hoang explains, “the sex industry plays a vital role in establishing *social* contracts for state entrepreneurs with political capital to strike deals with private entrepreneurs and foreign investors” (11, emphasis in original). It is all about trust building, she continues: “In order to attract investments from foreign companies and negotiate contracts in the region, men rely on the labor of hostess-workers to ease the tensions between factions, facilitate relations of trust, and broker business deals” (11).

Hoang's arguments in this section of the book expand on the pathbreaking work of political-scientist and gender theorist Nguyễn-võ Thu-huong, who argues similarly that "prostitution as a set of practices had become integral to economic liberalization" (2008, 6). The connection between sex work and deal making—what Nguyễn-võ memorably calls the "hooking economy"—has been one of Ho Chi Minh City's many "open-secrets." But open secrets are often hard to substantiate, and the intensive fieldwork Hoang conducted, especially in the largely closed world of bars like Khong Sao, has transformed a compelling theory into something close to the order of fact, with clear and compelling evidence. Hoang's evidence demonstrates that these bars are undeniably used to show Vietnam's economic rise and to facilitate economic activity. In one telling case, an informant with the pseudonym Chu Hai tells Hoang that he has moved beyond dealing with Americans: "They think they own the world. I want them to come here and see that Vietnam is not a poor, backward country anymore. I want them to see these buildings and see the energy on the streets. Then, I want them to know that we don't need any of their money" (57). He goes on to say that he is more comfortable dealing with East Asian businessmen, because they know how to finesse the law and how to build trust: "Westerners don't do business in bars. They call it corruption; we call it building trust" (57). Throughout the book, elite male Vietnamese businessmen readily acknowledge that sex workers are central to their business deals. Chu Thach, one such businessman, explains: "Without the sex industry we cannot build business relationships. We need them to help bring business to Vietnam... This is the way we have been doing business since the 1980s. Asian men expect this service. We cannot get around it" (82). In these descriptions, we learn not only that a particular kind of feminized labor is constructed to fit the demands of these kinds of deals, but that Vietnamese men engage in their own kinds of essentialism about "Asian men." If gender is a performance, it is not only so for women. There are performances all around.

Buried in these performances of elite male superiority are also hints of extraordinary male anxiety. At times, readers might feel like some of these elite men are subliminally comparing the length of their penises when they talk about their conspicuous consumption. One particularly wealthy Vietnamese client, Chu Hanh, seems preoccupied with how he can project his manhood through ostentatious displays of wealth. It's not readily apparent who, besides his underlings and paid escorts, is really watching him or even interested, but he is constantly eager to assert himself. At one point he says:

What other place in the world plays like this? We can take these men around in Bentleys worth half a million U.S. dollars paid in cash, and take them to high-end bars. Even in America, white men do not spend this much money on entertainment. It would be like driving a house in Little Saigon [Orange County, California] around on the streets of Saigon. And they don't even own their own homes! The Viet Kieu years in Vietnam are now over. Now it's the Viet Cong time. Asia is where the money is now... Vietnamese have a lot of money! (73)

While it may certainly be true that new rich like Chu Hanh are now wealthier than most expats and working-class overseas Vietnamese—with their pitiable mortgages, car loans, and credit-card debt—it is also true that Chu Hanh seems inordinately fixated on proving himself against people who would never consider themselves the elite of their own society. Why is this man, who clearly styles himself as one of Vietnam's elites, so focused on proving himself better than run-of-the-mill men from other societies? Furthermore, one can't help but imagine how well Chu Hanh's antics and male bravado might play out with actual elite guests from major global corporations. Would Bill Gates be impressed? What would Sheryl Sandberg say?

The second bar, "Lavender," is an upscale bar that caters primarily to overseas Vietnamese men (Việt Kiều) living in the diaspora, who come back either to visit or to live for an extended time in the homeland.<sup>1</sup> The bar itself is run by two "mommies," both college graduates and former marketing professionals, who designed it in such a way as to cultivate a sort of VIP opulence and high-end luxury that put male spending on open display. Men are encouraged to publicly consume expensive bottles of liquor rather than beer, and hostesses serve the men, drink with them, and sit with them at their tables, often performing exaggerated acts of submissiveness to add to the spectacle. As in all the bars Hoang studied, the mommies facilitate interactions between the men and the women, but the women are free to choose if they want to leave the bar with a client. Hoang shows how the style and performance of gender in Lavender specifically caters to the specific desires of overseas Vietnamese men, who, she argues, want to enact a sense of exclusivity and superiority. For example, in this bar, "it was an unspoken rule that Western men generally had to wait in the queue unless they were accompanied by a group of overseas or local Vietnamese men. The symbolic and systematic denial of Western men from these bars made Lavender one of the most attractive sites for Viet Kieu men, who operated in a more expensive niche market than Westerners" (43).

Building from this analysis, Hoang argues that the bar caters to men looking to recuperate a sense of failed masculinity and keen on asserting their sense of the “rise of Asia” in the face of Western decline. The women play into these masculine desires and anxieties and know how to use them to improve their own earnings. In one telling statement, a nineteen-year-old sex worker put it bluntly: “This business is really complicated. Serving means that you have to be lower than a man. White guys don’t know how to tip. You can sit there with them for two or three hours and walk away from the table with empty hands (*tay khong*). Viet Kieu men tip more if you make them feel more special than white men” (69). Hoang reveals the strategic and savvy manipulation of gendered deference and submission, and the cultivation of a space that builds on performing a fantasy.

Hoang also worked in two bars explicitly designed to serve Western men. One of these bars, “Secrets,” catered to Western transnational businessmen and expatriates, and the other, “Naughty Girls,” catered to Western budget travelers. In both of these bars, Hoang describes a very different form of gendered performance, in which the sex workers play on narratives of Western patriarchy. Put simply, the women here learned to manipulate gendered and racialized stereotypes of Vietnam as a place filled with destitute village girls struggling to drag themselves out of poverty. The Western men, whom Hoang describes as largely emasculated second-rate also-rans, buy into these gender performances because the illusion helps them recuperate their declining sense of Western dominance. By enacting stereotypes of dependency and poverty, the women not only stroke the men’s egos but convince them to give them large remittances. In many of the examples, the Western men come across as pawns, duped by their own pretensions to benevolence. But what is also quite fascinating is the degree to which many of the men willingly go along with the fantasy. They admit to their own fallen positions, and also often seem to recognize the fact that many of the women are playing games with them. Some of the tall tales, truth bending, and “talking nonsense” that Leshkovich described in Bến Thành market seems to appear in Hoang’s descriptions—and yet both the men and the women engage in the nonsense. Daniel, a Western man in his mid-thirties, told Hoang, “None of the guys here will ever say this, but we all sort of know it.... The guys who are working here in Vietnam are men who for the most part couldn’t make it in New York, Hong Kong, or Shanghai” (64). But while the men and the women seemed to be acting out a fantasy, there was also a sense at times that

they were still holding out for something more real to emerge from this. They were both in on the open secret and oblivious to it.

But the nonsense could also turn serious. If the women were experts at playing the men, some of them also told Hoang that “they wanted to hold out for the client who could take the best care of them” (123). What operates on one level as a shrewd manipulation of a certain fantasy of male patriarchy imperceptibly morphs into something real. Indeed, in all the cases, there seems to be a dance between performances of gender submission and a process through which that submission becomes normalized as part of the status quo. Again, as we learned from Massey and Leshkovich, people act out their gender, but gendered expectations act back on them. As Hoang puts it, the women have agency, but this agency is not unfettered: “Sex workers in [Ho Chi Minh City] act as astute entrepreneurs within existing structures of patriarchy” (17).

While the ethnographic evidence in *Dealing in Desire* is strong, this last point about acting freely within structures of patriarchy remains generally (and perhaps intentionally) underexplored in the book, which tends to focus primarily on the agency and autonomy of the women involved. By the end of the book, there is no doubt that much of what goes on is a performance, and it is also clear that the women are not forced into sex work. Hoang convincingly shows that the sex workers are not victims; they themselves exclaim that they certainly do not need to be saved by aid workers (107). But it remains worth considering what it means when one of the most lucrative directions available to assert one’s agency and autonomy in society requires one to perform submission. Furthermore, at what point does a performance of submission become an enduring part of one’s identity? This is a point Leshkovich addresses in her book on market traders when she insists on the subtle theoretical distinction between the concept of strategic essentialism and her concept of the political economy of appearances. As Leshkovich argues, there is a point at which the appearances people put on actually become part of who they are. What may sometimes look like a purely autonomous strategy eventually becomes integrated into the habitus. Like the famous admonition not to frown too much lest it become permanent, or that a life of fake smiles will lead to unsightly wrinkles, embodied performances can not necessarily be turned on and off as easily as Hoang sometimes implies. This would seem especially so in the many examples she details of “technologies of embodiment” designed to construct desirable bodies, which include an entire menu of

irreversible forms of cosmetic surgery. Again, the face can sometimes grow to fit the mask, especially when double eyelid surgery or rhinoplasty is involved.<sup>2</sup>

These ethnographies about market traders and sex workers show that performing purposeful acts of feminized submission can have the remarkable effect of empowering women. The market traders actively “classed down” and essentialized their own subaltern status, and the sex workers actively performed submissiveness for their Vietnamese clients or acted like poor village girls for their Western clients. In the process, they all managed to carve out space for autonomous entrepreneurial action (and to earn significant profits). But what are the limits to such autonomy? And what if women choose to assert autonomy by actively rejecting established gender hierarchies instead of essentializing them? In anthropologist Catherine Earl’s ethnography of educated urban migrant women, *Vietnam’s New Middle Classes: Gender, Career, City*, we encounter themes of gendered performance quite similar to those described above. But the difference is that Earl’s informants are actively seeking to rise in the class hierarchy by escaping or rejecting gendered submission—they are, to borrow Leshkovich’s evocative phrasing, “classing up” and not down. Through what she calls a “person-centered” approach to ethnography, Earl focuses on the everyday lives and stories of “aspirational” women whom she explicitly identifies as part of Vietnam’s “emerging middle class.” She describes how these women constantly attempt to transcend gendered practices, but also reveals how they often become trapped by them as they seek to develop professional careers and negotiate their identities as Vietnamese women.

While the women Earl studied—educated, upwardly mobile professionals—would almost certainly dissociate themselves from the world of sex workers and market traders described in the two works discussed above, it is nevertheless striking how many of Earl’s conclusions support those made by Leshkovich and Hoang. Discussing white-collar occupations and professional careers, for example, Earl writes:

In this context, femininity can act effectively as embodied cultural capital. Jobs in Vietnam are not gender neutral and femininity has been naturalized as a workplace practice. An inherently feminine character continues to be associated with certain occupations that, in addition to being open to women, provide the conditions that can enable upward mobility. Yet conforming to gender normalcy offers limited scope to move up socially and young educated women may seek to reconfigure their genderized behaviours. (134)



In the process of learning about these women's aspirations, we also learn, much like we did in the other cases, about how femininity is deployed as a form of "embodied cultural capital" in the face of a gendered society that rewards particular modes of comportment. But throughout the book, Earl also depicts women who are actively engaged in rejecting and transforming the gendered landscape within which they live. As Earl shows, however, it is not always easy to break out of gender norms.

Earl's book is in many ways less focused and the arguments less coherent and forceful than those presented by Hoang and Leshkovich, but her project is explicitly driven by a commitment to depicting everyday livelihoods and personal struggles produced by larger social pressures to conform. The fragmentary style Earl employs is intentional, and she notes that her "fieldwork practice centred on the world of the informants and reveal[ed] the complexities of actual living, what was salient to them, what it was like to *live there* and to live through change" (39). She sought to "create a snapshot, rather than an aerial map, of Ho Chi Minh City's new middle classes. This snapshot took the form of a plot, story, or account illustrated by individual cultural portraits" (39). In this way, the book operates as an accumulation of stories, which makes it a valuable depiction of middle-class women as they navigate the structures of gender and class in the city. Building on research that began in 1998, Earl embedded herself in the lives of a handful of women living in two neighborhoods: an alleyway (*hẻm*) in Tân Định district, a modest yet well-established, densely populated, and socially diverse district near the center of downtown, and a neighborhood in Gò Vấp, a newly urbanized, formally rural district on the northern edge of the city with larger, more affordable, and more recently built homes. In both of these districts, she introduces readers to intimate portraits of individual women, whose life stories inform her interpretation of middle-class aspiration in the city. We meet other women throughout the book as well, all with further stories of middle-class aspiration.

The stories are all presented as individual tales of upward social mobility, but shared themes emerge. Most central to Earl's analysis is the draw of the city, which, she argues, "enables educated young women to take up opportunities that they might never have had without migrating to the city" (107). While these aspirations are also clearly expressed in the lives of all the women described in all these books, what distinguishes the women in Earl's study from most of the women described in Hoang's and Leshkovich's work is the role of education and family resources. Earl instructively links the focus on education to a longer history of women's

strategies for advancement in postcolonial Saigon, which she reads through a careful analysis of women's memoirs. She shows that education offered a way to break free from patriarchy, in earlier years as well as more recent times:

Urban middle-class women were able to attain high levels of education and, as a result of working in white-collar professions, they were able to support themselves and their households rather than depend only on men. Unlike prostitutes and bar girls, educated middle-class women were able to gain access to lucrative and high status positions in foreign-invested and private sector employment markets through their social networks and using existing family resources. Yet their work was unstable and they were restricted by a gender-based "glass ceiling." (85)

The comparison to prostitutes and bar girls here, when juxtaposed against Hoang's ethnography, is both troubling and instructive. In Hoang's work, we learn that sex workers are not passive victims but are deeply aspirational, and many of their life narratives show how they, too, are fighting to improve their economic lot by moving to the city, much like the women Earl describes. But in many cases they do not have the same access to family resources or education. Rather than recognizing a shared plight in fighting gendered structures of patriarchy, however, middle-class women actively differentiate themselves from other women in the city. They have hopes and dreams, but they won't do what those "other" women do to achieve them.

The stories Earl tells show how middle-class women make concerted efforts to overcome what she calls the deeply "genderized" dynamics of life in Ho Chi Minh City. But in the quest to stand on their own feet, they are in many ways forced into a double bind: if they submit to the gendered logic of the city, they risk sacrificing many of their career ambitions and being forced into positions of subordination. And, at all turns, powerful gendered expectations persist. Most strikingly, as Earl points out that educated women in Vietnam have a hard time finding marriage partners (209). In response to this, women do not reject the institution of marriage but instead sometimes have what Earl describes as near-existential crises; women who willingly delay marriage must confront their own self-doubt in the face of their single lives.

In one of the most striking episodes in the book, one of Earl's closest informants, Liên, faces one of these existential crises of gender expectations while attending the wedding of a former classmate. Throughout the book, Liên appears as a strong, confident, professional office manager who has a foreign postgraduate degree and expresses her independence and autonomy. But in the middle of her friend's wedding party, Liên suddenly becomes overwhelmed and

excuses herself, exiting the building abruptly, “without stopping to greet people at their tables.”

Earl writes:

Outside, the warm evening air was a relief after the chill of the air-conditioning. Despite her smile, Liên was upset.... Liên attempted to hide what she felt. She had found out for certain that she was the last unmarried person in her class, a fact she had not expected. At the time, I failed to grasp the significance of this for Liên. She usually relied on her education and employment as an explanation for her temporarily delayed marriage. However, with all her classmates and peers having already established a career and been married, her single status now seemed to be becoming permanent, at least in their eyes. She did not regard herself in these terms; she did not want to remain alone. (214)

Liên’s life, despite her attempts to construct it on her own terms, was also, to borrow a phrase from Earl, thoroughly “genderized.” If she thought she could clobber gender with class mobility, social pressures to conform to gendered expectations of a conventional family life had, in this case at least, unceremoniously clobbered her back.

Leshkovich, Hoang, and Earl all share a dedication to illuminating the hidden struggles and also revealing the important contributions made by women who have largely been rendered invisible by the dominant gendered perspective of Ho Chi Minh City’s economy and livelihood. Taken together, their work combines to offer a striking revelation: these women are all central to the working of the city and the economy, and yet their contributions remain invisible. While not focused specifically on gender, Annette Miae Kim’s book *Sidewalk City: Remapping Public Space in Ho Chi Minh City* also offers an extended meditation on how certain ways of seeing the city render much of it invisible. In Ho Chi Minh City, sidewalk life is everywhere, but city maps fail to convey how central it is, because the sidewalk’s “quotidian and sensorial qualities are at odds with the contemporary aesthetic of abstract and architectonic, digitally rendered urban maps” (85). The book is both a critical study of the power of maps and also a practical attempt to “move beyond mapping the edges of physical mass in favor of time, social relations, and economic activity” to “not reduce sidewalks to narrow slabs of concrete but reveal the important ways the space is used, negotiated, and experienced” (85).

As a planner with a self-proclaimed imperative to make concrete suggestions about urban design, Kim not only reveals our blinders but also proposes innovative ways of helping us see the city again. If the problem she identifies is mainly a problem with maps, the solution she offers is not to do away with maps but to make more self-reflexive maps—complicated,

innovative maps that integrate social-science knowledge (especially ethnography), narrative, and creative design to fight the reductive and obscurantist vision perpetuated by the hegemony of digital mapping technology. “The core quest of this book,” Kim states, “is to create a new kind of map that will unveil rather than obscure sidewalk life” (84). In the process, she explores the history of sidewalks and sidewalk regulation in Ho Chi Minh City, details the way formal maps render the city in reductionist ways, and reveals the overlooked everyday practices and livelihoods associated with informal sidewalk uses, such as “leisure, food, parking, moped taxis, other services, begging, merchandise, and other” (92).

Furthermore, Kim develops an integrated method that deploys three techniques of inquiry and practice: first, “spatial ethnography,” which combines ethnographic research with the visualization and spatial awareness of design theory; second, a theory of “property rights of public space” that focuses on everyday property rights instead of a narrow-minded, solely economic sense of rights to private property; and third, a practice-oriented vision of “critical cartography” (7). The result is not just a series of scholarly critiques, or an ethnographic monograph content with filling in the gaps of knowledge, but a set of provocative new maps (which she calls a “primer”), and even a pragmatic design proposal for a new urban tourist trail in Ho Chi Minh City, which she eventually presented to city officials, who undoubtedly learned to see the city in new ways when hearing her presentations.

In addition to its pragmatic focus and its many beautiful and compelling new maps, the book offers a valuable theory of sidewalks as public space and a studied reflection about the wider problem of how spaces and people can be overlooked by conventional planning maps, how these maps then produce intellectual blinders, and how these maps in turn constrain the creative planning possibilities of urban planners. The book is founded on the profound and troubling observation that sidewalks, clearly the most vibrant space of social interaction in Ho Chi Minh City, are absent from planning maps. This is striking, because anyone with eyeballs should be able to see the central role of sidewalk life in the city, and these spaces are arguably the only real “public space” of any consequence. But planners seem to discount the importance of sidewalk activity, and their maps don’t know what to do with them. Although sidewalks actually do exist in many of the maps, the scale and mode of depiction in AutoCAD-generated maps, which focus on the “edges of space” rather than what happens within that space, renders them into denigrated and unseen peripheries—long strips where it seems like nothing important happens. This, Kim

convincingly argues, obscures precisely the most important social space of the city and impoverishes the conceptual basis through which planners make their design interventions. Sidewalks, Kim shows us, “have the potential to be a remarkable democratizing space”; “the sidewalk space *is* the city to most people” (2). Indeed, around the world, “in many cities the main public space has been the sidewalk” (5). These are themes repeated, and convincingly substantiated, throughout the book.

To demonstrate the centrality of sidewalks using a language that planners can understand, Kim formed the Sidewalk Laboratory (SLAB) while teaching at MIT (she has since brought SLAB to the University of Southern California). Then, in 2010, she collaborated with a team of fieldworkers (four American students and four Vietnamese partners working in pairs) to perform physical surveys, conduct interviews, and take photographs documenting sidewalk activity in two sites in Ho Chi Minh City. The first site was based in the city’s central business district, the former French colonial center and primary tourist destination known as District 1, and the other was in Cholon, the city’s Chinatown located in District 5 (91). District 1 is laid out in orderly grids, mostly designed in accordance with “Hausmann-esque” French colonial planning principles, and District 5 is organized with more meandering, narrow streets that Kim says (in a bit of an Orientalizing simplification) have a “feng-shui” sidewalk design.<sup>3</sup> The two sites were chosen deliberately, because, as Kim shows in chapter 2, the planning history of District 1 (planned by the French) and Cholon (largely founded by Chinese) both followed different trajectories. Despite these differences, both areas exhibit lively street life, which demolishes the assumption that people’s behavior is inherently dictated by the top-down designs of planners. During fieldwork, the team collected 3,876 observations, including observations of 6,490 people (93). These observations were all integrated into a system of GIS points and polygons using an innovative system Kim devised to integrate narrative, photographs, text, and sensorial aspects with rigorous empirical quantification of sidewalk use patterns that vary over both spatial and temporal dimensions. In the process, the team accumulated an extensive body of data that reconciles qualitative research with GIS mapping technologies, and supports what she calls the “mixed-use sidewalk paradigm.” In this paradigm, which she likens to modern design principles of mixed-use planning, Kim argues that public sidewalk space “can be transacted between multiple types of users several times a day, expanding the possibilities of the use of space—a timely idea given the pressures of public space in rapidly urbanizing cities” (86).

Kim is a planner, and her goal is not just to show the blind spots that some planners have, but to speak to them and help them see the value of “Looking Again” (chapter 3), or “Mapping the Unmapped” (chapter 4). So, despite her emphasis on critical cartography, she wants to push forward with new practices of cartography—what she calls, perhaps influenced a bit too much by the digital world she critiques, or perhaps gently mocking it, “critical cartography 2.0.” This is a “critical humanist cartography” driven by the question of “how to make critical maps and understand their role in society” (71). What might this all look like?

Ever the pragmatist and clearly tired of academic tendencies to sling criticism without offering suggestions, Kim aims to show, not just tell, by presenting ten original maps of her own. They are inspired creations that need to be seen to be understood (see pages 112–149 in the book), but the premise of the ten maps is to move from an abstract aerial view to a deeply impressionistic up-close sensorium, thus moving roughly from the sky into the heart and soul of a person on the street. “The Conventional Urban Planning Map” is what it seems—an abstract AutoCAD-generated top-down projection of city streets; “The Net Map” uses a “poché” technique that blacks out everything but sidewalks, thus focusing the viewer’s attention on this neglected space; “The GIS Data Map” uses GIS data to map different uses of the sidewalk with color-coded points and polygons, thus making the diversity of action pop into view; “The Ghost Map” maps human activities instead of built space, illuminating the human but obscuring built form; and so on. The mapping section concludes with “Not a Map,” a map-like image on beeswax-coated rice paper that has been built up into layers smothered and etched and digitally rendered on top of a close-up photograph of a street vendor. Together, these maps tell us a story and draw the viewer into a reflexive dialogue. They reveal and conceal in their own right, but, in conversation with one another, they all spur the viewer to confront the fact that any kind of representation involves a negotiation of appearances and disappearances.

What Leshkowich, Hoang, and Earl do with their focus on the hidden and suppressed history of gendered space, Kim does with the suppressed and overlooked practices that are obscured by maps. All four have taken up Massey’s call to look critically at the way in which city space is apportioned and laid out—to ask who feels comfortable going where, who considers themselves included or excluded, who does what kind of work, and so on. But all of these books have pushed beyond Massey’s original observations as well. Fixating on the most visible manifestations of gender in a city or standing back and criticizing planning maps may tell us that



we are missing a great deal, but it does not show exactly what we are missing. To really see the city again requires getting out of the critic's armchair and talking to people. It requires fieldwork. When we move beneath the surface of city life, for example, it's not so clear that men control the spaces of the city after all, and it's not so clear that the most visible spaces are even that important to how the city really works. Recognizing that the city is gendered or that maps are incomplete is only the first step. The most important step is to see how people navigate the city, and to show how they have an effect back on it. For this old goat, the message is clear: get out and do some ethnography!

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### Notes

- 1 The term "Việt Kiều," commonly used within Vietnam to refer to overseas Vietnamese, is the subject of some controversy. Some, but not all, Vietnamese Americans consider the term derogatory. For a useful discussion of the term, see Small (2012, 237).
- 2 It is worth noting in a footnote that Hoang is less careful with historical arguments than she is with ethnography. For example, the book asserts that the role of sex work in lubricating business deals can be linked to the rise of Asia and Western decline, which she dates to the 2008 financial crisis. But when making the connection between masculinity, economic deal making, and sex work, the book invokes the work of Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương as a key source. That work, published in 2008, was based on research largely conducted in 1996, 1997, and 2000, thus indicating that the role of sex work in finance has deeper roots than Hoang implies. The quote from Chu Thach (cited in the text above) also traces these practices to the 1980s. Also, chapter 2 seems to imply that there was no precolonial history of sex work or that sex work disappeared from Vietnam after the Vietnam War. These assertions make assumptions that are difficult to substantiate. Furthermore, Hoang's use of terms like Việt Minh, Việt Cộng, and Việt Kiều is relatively uncritical, and her claim that French involvement in Vietnam began in 1842 ignores a much longer missionary history. A photo in the book that purports to be of an "old colonial building that will be torn down and replaced with a new commercial development" (9) is, in fact, Vincom Center B, which was built in a faux-colonial style *after* evicting more than 130 households and demolishing the historic Eden apartment building, as well as surrounding businesses.
- 3 We never learn what the geomantic principles of these curvy streets are, and "feng-shui" here is used almost as a shorthand substitute for "Chinese," or "not planned on a grid."



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