

Introduction

Dealing in Desire

On a hot summer evening in 2006, I found myself sitting on the back of a stranger's motorbike as he gave me a tour of the local sex industry. How I got there was a combination of luck, naïveté, and a lack of options. I went to Vietnam with the intention of studying the commercial sex industry, but I had no idea how I would gain access to it or what I would find. Unsure of how to get started or where to go in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), I did not venture far. I walked into a bar located right outside my hotel that catered primarily to Western tourists.

My approach was simple: enter the bar, explain my research interests to the bar owner, and hope that the sex workers would speak to me about their experiences. Unsurprisingly, a foreign woman venturing into a bar alone does not inspire much in the way of trust. Dejected, I spent the night talking to a bartender, Duy, who convinced me that I needed to broaden the scope of my research project by first touring the different sites within Ho Chi Minh City's richly diverse sexscape.¹ He told me, "This is just one bar. There are many more bars out there that cater to different kinds of men." Though Duy did not personally know anyone who worked in other bars, because he could not afford to patronize them, he advised me to ask one of the motorbike-taxi drivers outside the Caravelle Hotel (a local five-star hotel in the heart of HCMC's business district) to show me the sex industry through his lens.

With no other leads, I followed Duy's suggestion, and at around midnight the next night I made my way to the Caravelle. There I met Anh

Bao, a thirty-two-year-old motorbike driver dressed in blue jeans and a black satin button-up shirt, with a cigarette firmly tucked into the left side of his mouth. I negotiated a price of twenty U.S. dollars (VND 400,000) for the night and asked him to show me the sex-work industry as he saw it.² Intrigued by my request and curious as to what a Vietnamese American woman was doing out late at night on the streets alone, he enthusiastically obliged. And on the back of Anh Bao's motorbike, I crisscrossed the city with him as he mapped out the different sectors of Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry.

For a long stretch of time we drove past parks and streets, before Anh Bao began pointing out the touristy areas most often frequented by Western men. These streets were lined with travel agencies, restaurants, and street-food vendors catering to Western tastes, children selling flowers and candy after midnight, and women on the patios of bars aggressively calling out to men passing by. Constant cries of "Come here! Come in, please!" ceased for only a moment when female tourists or couples walking together passed one of the dozens of bars.

Next, we drove past a series of high-end clubs with bouncers, strobe lights, booming music, and bars lit by LED lights that beamed through the windows. Drove of taxicabs dropped off overseas Vietnamese (Viet Kieu) who entered the club in groups. As I sat on the back of his bike, Anh Bao pointed out local sex workers he recognized as they walked out of a bar with their arms wrapped around Viet Kieu men. He had gotten to know these women when he parked his bike outside the bar around closing time to offer cheap rides home to the women who had been unable to secure a client for the evening. Over the course of nearly three hours spent circling the city, I took everything in—making mental notes of things I would later enter into my research. Anh Bao was a storyteller; and as we stopped outside each place, I sat propped on his bike laughing as he made up dramatic scenarios about the kinds of love affairs that occurred in each segment of the sex industry.

Contrasting the tourist bars—with their patios and women workers who called out to Western budget travelers—to the lavish clubs where Viet Kieus arrived in taxis and left with attractive sex workers wrapped around their necks, I began to cultivate an empirical puzzle. That first motorbike tour with Anh Bao opened my eyes to the heterogeneity within Vietnam's sex industry. To my knowledge, the literature on global sex work at that time did little to compare multiple markets that cater to different clientele from diverse socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. I wanted to learn more about how sex workers made their

way into the different bars, about the intimate relationships between men and women, and about the organizational structure and management inside those spaces. Why did some women go to bars catering to Westerners, while others chose bars catering to overseas Vietnamese men? How did the intimate relationships vary across the different bars?

And so I began my journey into the richly diverse social and cultural geography of Vietnam's sex industry. I set out to expand the sociology of sex work by incorporating a serious analysis of male clients into my study and to compare the different niche markets that catered to racially and economically diverse groups of men. My interest in the variation among segments of HCMC's sex-work industry led me deep within the bars and clubs that Anh Bao showed me on that first night, and also well beyond them. In addition to segments of the sex industry catering to Western budget travelers and Viet Kieus, I discovered two more niche markets, which catered to wealthy local Vietnamese businessmen and Western businessmen. Each niche market presented its own purposes, logics, and practices for ethnographic exploration.

Following seven months of preliminary research between 2006 and 2007, I returned to Vietnam in June of 2009, where I spent the next fifteen months conducting research for my dissertation. My goal was not to simply skim the surface and do a few interviews with sex workers and clients—I wanted the deepest possible understanding of the industry from both the worker's perspective and the client's. To attain this level of understanding, I had to immerse myself in each niche market by working as a hostess or bartender and developing relations of trust with workers and clients alike.

What I did not realize at the time was that I was conducting research in an area that was about to take a major turn. The 2008 global financial crisis that rocked the United States and Europe had the opposite effect on Vietnam. As the second-fastest-developing economy after China, Vietnam was a new international goldmine. Investors from around the world made their way to Ho Chi Minh City to capitalize on what they saw as a booming economy and a promising market for foreign investments. Talk about Vietnam's astonishing economic growth was rampant among everyone from street vendors to international businessmen. In the span of fifteen months, between May 2009 and August 2010, I watched as the state bulldozed several old colonial buildings and replaced them with steel-and-glass high-rises. Construction crews, machinery, materials, and jobs appeared on every block as new structures rose to be marveled at by global elites and poor locals alike.

These economic transformations, I discovered, were tightly woven into the social and cultural fabric that structured many of the relationships inside the bars I studied. In the most elite bars, men brokering capital deals spent exorbitant amounts of money on alcohol and women, and they made a point to pay with cash to display the vibrancy of Vietnam's economy to foreign investors. It was through these grounded interactions that I came to understand how the intimate relationships formed within different segments of the sex industry were embedded in the dramatic political and economic transformations occurring not only in Vietnam but also around the world.

This book draws on ethnographic and interview-based data that I gathered while working in four different bars of Ho Chi Minh City's global sex industry catering to local Vietnamese elites and other Asian businessmen, overseas Vietnamese men living abroad, Western businessmen, and Western budget travelers (backpackers). These multiple niche markets served a diverse group of men all tied to different kinds of global capital. For example, the market catering to local elites and their Asian business partners relied on the labor of hostess-workers to project confidence in Vietnam's booming market economy, a confidence that facilitated foreign direct investment through speculative capital deals. The market catering to Western budget travelers attracted a different kind of global capital, overseas remittance money that the male clients called "charity capital,"³ through the labor of sex workers who portrayed Vietnam's Third World poverty. Thus, as I worked in each bar, I found myself enmeshed in a distinct social world of economic capital. Drawing on Viviana Zelizer's description of "market money," I watched as economic capital took on different social and cultural meanings within each bar, which became a site of interaction between global and local economies. "Not all dollars [we]re equal" in these four sites, and their meanings were expressed through interactions of race, class, and especially gender in each bar, a space charged with desire.⁴

Dealing in Desire explores how high finance and overseas economic remittances are inextricably intertwined with relationships of intimacy. For Vietnam's domestic superelite who use the levers of political power to channel foreign capital into real estate and manufacturing projects, conspicuous consumption provided both a lexicon of distinction and a means of communicating hospitality to potential investors. With the opening of Vietnam's economy to foreign investment, a new ultra-high-end tier of sex workers emerged who deployed vocabularies of consumption and sexuality in an elaborate symbolic dance tailored to the

needs of individual capital deals. In a slightly lower-tiered niche market catering to overseas Vietnamese men, sex workers were valued not only for their beauty but also for their ability to project deference around their clients while highlighting Asia's rapid economic rise. Sex workers who catered to Western men in the two lowest-paying markets worked to project poverty and dependence to help men negotiate their personal sense of failed masculinity in the context of Western economic decline. As such, different configurations of racialized desires, social status, business success, and hope for upward mobility all play out differently in the four niche markets in which I conducted fieldwork. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the course of five years in Vietnam, between 2006 and 2010, *Dealing in Desire* illuminates Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry not simply as a microcosm of the global economy but as a critical space where dreams and deals are traded.

CAPITALIST ASCENDANCY IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Most scholars who examine the coproduction of gender and global capital situate their studies within common frameworks that divide the world into two economic categories: “more developed” regions of the world, such as Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan; and “less developed regions,” which encompass the rest of the world. As a result, maps of global economic flows tend to show the movement of money from First World Western nations like the United States and Europe to less developed countries through lending institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or in the form of private commercial lending through foreign direct investments (FDI).⁵ In this context, those who look at the coproduction of gender and global capital tend to highlight the dominance of Western nations—and the *men* in charge of directing global capital flows from those nations—in transforming the social, cultural, and gendered relations of “less developed” economies.

This framework for organizing and understanding nation-based hierarchies that places the West at the top of the global order has been so powerful that even critical scholars like Aiwaha Ong, Lisa Rofel, Julie Chu, Karen Kelsky, and others who work to deconstruct East/West or global/local binaries through theories of multiple or alternative modernities situate their frameworks in relation to the “originally” modern West.⁶ Regarding East Asia, for example, Koichi Iwabuchi and Karen Kelsky describe how Japan—a country that is economically part of the

Global North—remained subject to multiple forms of Western cultural domination that racialized, emasculated, and rendered Japan as inferior to the modern West.⁷ As a result, as Aiwaha Ong and many others have noted, nations like Japan and China alone cannot contest Western cultural dominance; rather it is the collective rise of multiple countries within pan-Asia that has destabilized Western hegemony.⁸

The last ten years (2005–2014) have witnessed dramatic changes in global financial flows that have shifted the economic center of gravity more toward East Asia, raising important questions about the waning dominance of the West. Two major, simultaneous events in particular push us to rethink the World Bank’s previous division of the world: the 2008 global financial crisis that rocked the United States and Europe and the concurrent rise of East Asia. According to the 2011 *World Wealth Report* by Merrill Lynch and Capgemini, for the first time in history there are now more millionaires in Asia than in Europe.⁹ Moreover, in 2012, the World Bank reported that East Asia accounted for 32 percent of global market capitalization, ahead of the United States, at 30 percent, and Europe, at 25 percent.¹⁰ The 2008 global financial crisis reversed the fortunes of leading global cities like New York, London, and Tokyo, which struggled to retain their lead in relation to Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Shanghai.¹¹ David Harvey dubs these transformations “the rise of rebel cities,” where the rising skylines of Asian cities represent the new horizons of global markets.¹² Concomitant with the economic rise of countries in East and Southeast Asia, formerly dominant countries have felt the effects of Western decline. In her book *Citizen Protectors*, for example, Jennifer Carlson narrates a context of American decline in the United States, where the men in her study describe the loss of well-paying jobs, safe communities, and cheap goods that support breadwinner masculinity.¹³ These shifts in global capital tell a revealing story: that the developing world is becoming a driver of the global economy. As this book highlights, these global economic transformations have produced new tensions as the fortunes of local Southeast Asian elites shift from depending on Western-based capital to depending on Asian-based capital flows.

WHY STUDY VIETNAM?

One way to understand the effects of this new pan–East Asian rise is to examine how people in less developed regions within Southeast Asia articulate their national ideals in comparison to people in more developed

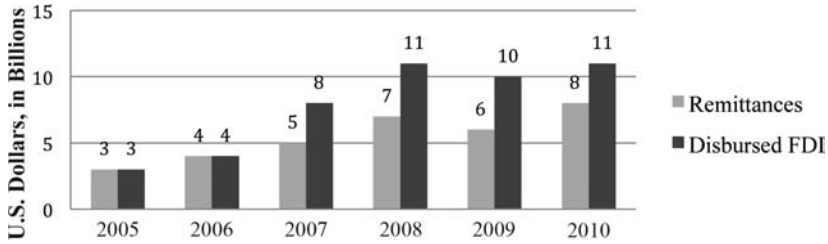


FIGURE 1. Overseas remittances and disbursed foreign direct investments (FDI).
Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2011 data.

countries within Asia and to the West. With the rise of East and Southeast Asia, Vietnam, like other smaller countries in the region, gained a platform to articulate new national ideals that challenge common representations of poverty in the Global South and the latter's oppressed relation to the West; Vietnam did so by making itself an attractive site for East and Southeast Asian investment capital. At the same time, Western and diasporic men traveling to this region for business or leisure must contend with these transformations.

Vietnam provides a compelling site to investigate these complex processes of rise and decline. Largely unaffected by the 2008 global economic slowdown, Vietnam's economy grew nearly 8 percent each year between the point when it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO, hereafter) in 2006 and the time of this research. This growth attracted foreign direct investment. By 2010, annual FDI was nearly three times the amount brought into the country in 2006. Figure 1 shows two forms of capital: overseas remittances (money sent from foreign workers in the Vietnamese diaspora) and disbursed FDI (investment capital that has been registered and accounted through state banks). The General Statistics Office of Vietnam reported that FDI skyrocketed from U.S.\$4 billion in 2006 to \$11 billion in 2010.¹⁴ By 2010, FDI disbursed capital was nearly four times as much as the foreign capital brought into the country in 2005 prior to WTO membership.

Figure 2 adds a third dimension to the flow of foreign capital: committed FDI. The difference between disbursed capital and committed capital is the difference between actualized money and promised money. For example, on a land development project with a projected investment of U.S.\$50 million, a foreign investor might disburse \$20 million in the first phase of construction and commit to bringing in another \$30 million in later phases of construction.

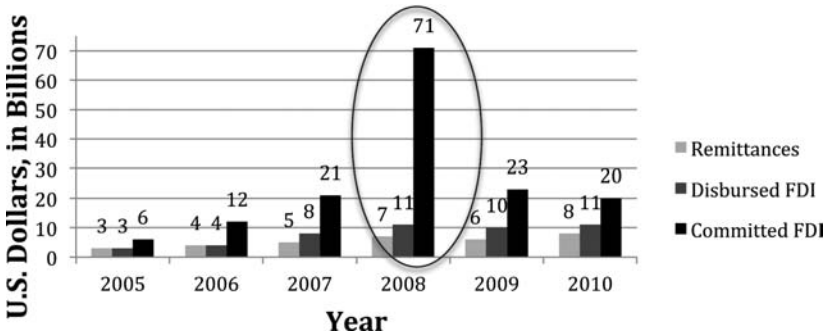


FIGURE 2. Overseas remittances, disbursed foreign direct investments (FDI), and committed foreign direct investments. Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2011 data.

Importantly, looking strictly at committed or promised capital, there was a major spike, to U.S.\$71 billion, in 2008, which occurred at the height of the global financial crisis. Regardless of whether the committed capital actually made its way through state banks, the spike in 2008 hints at a rapid increase in the brokering of deals.¹⁵ This is indicative of the highly speculative markets and the volatility emerging in the Vietnamese economy, as well as the rapid increase in the number of deals being brokered during that time.

But if the United States and Europe experienced a financial crisis in 2008, where was all this capital coming from? Before 2006, the United States was one of the largest foreign investors in Vietnam. Between 1995 and 2005, Australia, Canada, and the United States were the largest providers of FDI in Vietnam. However, by 2009, Western nations played a much smaller role in Vietnam’s market economy as countries within the Asia-Pacific region began to take over. And by 2010, the six leading contributors were Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong (figure 3).¹⁶ Capital from these sources overtook both Western investments and overseas remittances, giving an Asian face to wealth in Vietnam for the first time.¹⁷

The shifting sources of capital led to a rapid altering of the social and urban landscape as bulldozers tore down old colonial buildings, like the one in figure 4, to make room for new high-rises, as depicted in figure 5. During the fifteen months that I conducted research in HCMC, between 2009 and 2010, a new high-rise steel tower appeared each month; for this reason, foreigners and locals alike dubbed Vietnam the new “international goldmine.” Investors engaged in major land speculation as they

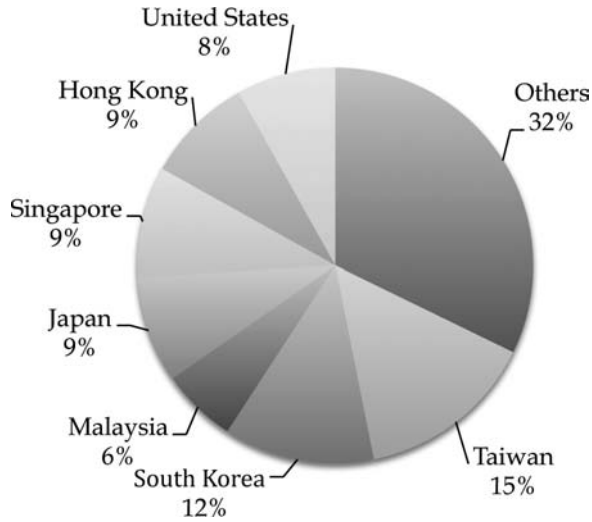


FIGURE 3. Sources of foreign direct investments in 2010. Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2011 data.



FIGURE 4. An old colonial building that will be torn down and replaced with a new commercial development. Photo by Johanna Hoelzl, 2013.



FIGURE 5. A 2010 high-rise development project in the shape of a lotus, by Bitexco, a Vietnamese state-owned enterprise with a South Korean CEO. Photo by Danny Phan, 2014.

sought out development projects that were expected to yield rapid, high returns on their investments. By 2010, the manufacturing, real estate, construction, and hotel development and tourism sectors dominated Vietnam's economy, rapidly replacing the previous, agriculture-based economy that had dominated through the mid-1980s. These changes marked the beginning of a transition toward an industry- and service-based economy.¹⁸ This economic shift created a new opportunity for Vietnam to reposition itself and decide how to imagine its pathway toward modern nationhood with respect to Asia and the West.

How do shifting global capital configurations destabilize the terms in which diverse men and women negotiate their perceptions of the rise of East and Southeast Asia and the simultaneous waning of the dominance

of the West? The multiple niche markets in Vietnam's global sex industry offer insight into some of the larger macroeconomic shifts that reframe our understanding of the coproduction of gender and global capital.

THE HIDDEN CURRENCIES IN VIETNAM'S SEX INDUSTRY

Foreign direct investments are not disembodied flows of global economic capital. People broker capital deals. In an ethnography of Wall Street, Karen Ho engages with the works of Karl Polanyi, who reminds us that “economic practices take place in a complicated web of social relationships, which change in degree and form over time.”¹⁹ Ho argues that when we assume that financial capital is abstract, separated, or decontextualized from concrete lived realities, we run the risk of allowing elite players in the global economy to define and decipher our economic lives.²⁰ In Vietnam, FDI is embodied in entrepreneurial relations that are largely male dominated and heavily influenced by existing practices established in China, Japan, and South Korea, where men rely heavily on the sex industry to facilitate informal social relations of trust as foreign investors embed themselves in the local economy.²¹

Vietnam's transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy beginning in 1986 created a domestic superelite that was connected to powerful political figures. However, in a country like Vietnam, where the majority of investors do not have faith in *legal* contracts enforced by the Vietnamese state, or when they seek to bypass many of the bureaucratic hoops to obtain land and permits through informal social networks, 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.²² 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 personal relations of trust, and broker business deals.²³ As political scientist Thu Huong Nguyen-Vo writes, “During marketization, the state, which includes the Communist Party and government, endowed a class of men with certain state-owned capital and freed them to make entrepreneurial choices in an economy that now included private entrepreneurs and foreign capital. Entrepreneurial men used sex buying to establish personal ties facilitating their access to the means of production and exchange in an economy that was moving from central command to one that depended on” the brokering of relations between state officials, foreign investors, and private entrepreneurs.²⁴

For local Vietnamese and other Asian businessmen, hostess bars are masculine spaces of leisure and consumption, where they can engage in deal-making practices crucial for organizing business ventures. Inside the bars, hostess-workers act as informal brokers of social capital, setting the stage for local elite men to dramatize Vietnam's potential as a lucrative place for foreign investment. In a highly speculative market driven by emotional calculations of risk and potential rewards, businessmen must establish informal relations of social trust to secure investment in speculative real estate markets and urban renewal land-development projects.

Hostess bars in Vietnam's sex industry have enabled local Vietnamese clients to secure business deals in an informal, nonbureaucratic, and culturally Asian setting, where they can build personal ties to mitigate financial risks through private and off-the-record knowledge of the economy.²⁵ As a result, a new high-end niche market of sex workers has emerged in tandem with the new Vietnamese political and economic superelite. These sex workers are valued not only for their beauty but also for their ability to deploy vocabularies of consumption that ease tensions between men in an elaborate symbolic dance tailored to the requirements of individual capital deals.

A look at local Vietnamese elites and their Asian business partners brokering capital deals tells only one part of the story: that of Asian ascendancy. By strategically looking at multiple segments of the sex industry, this book also examines how overseas Vietnamese men and Westerners simultaneously negotiate perceptions of Asia's rise and Western decline while recuperating their failed masculinity and marriages through personal relationships with local sex workers.

SEGMENTED NICHE MARKETS IN VIETNAM'S SEX INDUSTRY

This book brings sociological theories of globalization, markets, and gender into conversation to create a framework for analyzing segmented markets in the context of Vietnam's economic rise. Building on Zelizer's idea that markets and social life are inextricably intertwined, Rene Almeling argues that we should examine variation in how markets are configured.²⁶ I examine multiple niche markets of Vietnam's segmented sex industry to better explain how male clients and female sex workers negotiate their perceptions of Vietnam's repositioning in the global economy.

Dealing in Desire advances research on global sex work, research that has tended to focus overwhelmingly on female sex workers and

either overlooks the experiences of their male counterparts or focuses primarily on Western men.²⁷ Interestingly, while most research assumes that wealthy Western men brokering capital deals command the high-end sexual markets, in this Asian-centered economy the local elites and other Asian businessmen command the highest-paid niche markets. I illustrate how the men in these different niche markets participate in different projects that involve divergent understandings of Vietnam's place and future in the global economy.

For businessmen tied to Asian financial capital, the sex industry allows men to broker deals by projecting confidence in the Vietnamese market. For Western men and overseas Viet Kieus, who are largely excluded from the segment of the sex industry linked to business transactions and FDI flows—since the vast majority of FDI into Vietnam comes primarily from Asia—the sex industry serves a different purpose, allowing men to displace their status anxieties onto women's bodies. The three other niche markets inflate the diminishing egos of Viet Kieus, Western businessmen, and Western budget travelers as sex workers help attract overseas remittance money into the local economy.

Taken together, the niche markets that cater to local Vietnamese businessmen, Viet Kieus, Western businessmen, and Western budget travelers highlight how the commodification of sexual labor can have multiple and varied effects as male clients and female sex workers negotiate their changing status—either by embracing the shifts in global capital flows that bolstered Asia's ascendancy or by reproducing old regimes of global power that hinge on Western dominance. Local elite Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners fall on one end of the spectrum, in a niche market where relations of intimacy are tied to the trappings of East and Southeast Asian foreign direct investments. At the other end, intimate relations are tied to the trappings of paternalistic charitable giving from Western nations. By comparing multiple markets and weaving distinct relational configurations into one transnational story, this research questions several assumptions found in existing theories of global sex work.

ECONOMIES OF DESIRE: SEX WORK IN THE NEW GLOBAL ECONOMY

Dealing in Desire looks at clients and sex workers in multiple markets to show that the worlds of high finance and benevolent giving are never divorced from the personal and intimate gendered spheres of the informal economy. I examine interactions among men, and between men

and women, as they make emotionally calculated risks to fulfill individual desires that are intimately tied to their aspirations for the nation during a time of rapid economic expansion coupled with a great deal of economic volatility.

This book brings together three key theoretical insights crucial for understanding desire. First, we must situate desires as they converge and diverge across local, national, regional, and global social spaces.²⁸ I highlight new forms of desire linked to the broader political economy. The trappings of capitalist success and failure emerge in a context where global economic market insecurities lead to the rise of new translocal and transnational flows of money embedded in different race, class, and gender relations.

Second, I augment current works on postcolonial and global theories of intersectionality by stressing the material and cultural relations of desire. More specifically, I examine how men's performances of masculinity and women's embodied and performed femininities hinge on their structural locations within categories of race, nation, class, gender, and sexuality.²⁹ As Anne McClintock points out, these categories "are not distinct realms of experiences, existing in splendid isolation from each other; [rather], they come into existence in and through *relations* to each other."³⁰

Third, by comparing multiple niche markets, I show how men's performances of masculinity and women's corresponding performances of femininity are mobilized hierarchically in their desire to *affirm* Western superiority in the markets that cater to Western men and to *contest* Western dominance in the markets that cater to non-Western men. Through these interactions in everyday life, men and women actively work to construct competing hierarchies of race and nation in the global imaginary. A relational approach allows us to see how racialized, nation-based, and classed relations are mobilized through different intersecting relations. Men and women draw upon different consumption and production strategies in distinct spaces of leisure and entertainment in their desires to reimagine the developing world's place in relation to the West.

In other words, this book theorizes desire relationally as it moves from the macro level of the national political economy, to the meso level of the moral economies that structure different niche markets of the sex industry, to the micro level of individual hopes, dreams, and desires for upward mobility that connect particular men and women in intimate relations. In using this scalar approach to trace new economies

of desire in Vietnam, I build on the work of Julie Chu by situating individual desires for mobility in a particular cultural-historical moment where desire meets potentiality.³¹ In doing so, I focus on the productive frictions that shape men's and women's desires as they reflect the polarized tension between imaginaries of Vietnam as a nation on the move and as a former colony untouched by globalization.³² Therefore, while changes in the global economy structure relations of intimacy between clients and sex workers, intimacy also serves as a vital form of currency that shapes economic and political relations.

MASCULINE DISTINCTION AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

By connecting the three levels of analysis, I show how competing masculinities are expressed, negotiated, and reproduced through the enactment of male *desires* that double as status within the broader political economy and in relation with women. At the micro level, this book pays close attention to what Doreen Massey calls “differentiated mobility”—the uneven and unequal positioning of different groups in relation to different flows of capital and movements of people³³—to examine men's and women's hopes and aspirations to reimagine hierarchies of race, nation, and class differently in each niche market.

Men's desire for dominance over other men is enacted through the consumption of distinct types of sex workers in different spaces. For male clients, sex workers are products to be consumed in ways that enable them to enact distinction.³⁴ Chapter 3 brings together two key theoretical insights crucial for understanding multiple hierarchies of masculinities. First, I discuss how performances of masculinity depend on men's positions within global markets. That is, multiple masculinities intersect across local, national, regional, and global social spaces.³⁵ Second, I highlight new forms of privilege linked to the trappings of capitalist success and failure in a context where global economic market insecurities have led to the rise of new financescapes in Asia.

In the niche markets of HCMC that cater to Western men, masculinities are indeed mobilized to privilege an international hegemonic masculinity that *affirms* Western superiority.³⁶ However, I take this analysis one step further by illuminating a simultaneous process wherein local Vietnamese elites and Viet Kieus articulate their desire to imagine a new global order that no longer privileges a white, First World masculinity. These men construct competing notions of an international hegemonic masculinity that *contests* Western superiority in the Asia-Pacific region

using personal wealth and Vietnam's access to Asian FDI as an indicator of national dominance. In other words, two simultaneous processes are at work in HCMC's niche markets—a recuperation of Western power and a contestation of that very power by those with aspirations for Asian ascendancy.

Masculine distinction in the bars depends heavily on the labor of female sex workers. As I illustrate throughout the book, workers perform *femininity* to enhance men's performances of particular *masculinities*.³⁷ I introduce the term *competing technologies of embodiment* with greater theoretical and empirical depth in chapter 6 to explain how sex workers construct desirable bodies in different ways to cater to male clients' competing aspirations. In order to entice clients, sex workers who cater to wealthy local Vietnamese men and other Asian businessmen construct themselves as distinctly *pan-Asian* modern subjects, while workers who cater to Viet Kieus construct themselves as *nostalgic cosmopolitan* subjects, and women who cater to Western men construct themselves as *Third World* subjects dependent on Western support, to satisfy their clients' racialized desires. These differing embodiments and performances of femininity have symbolized Vietnam's changing economy as it has pushed to emerge as a rising dragon in a new era that embraces capitalism and an open market economy. Through these performances, sex workers effectively work together with clients to *contest* and actively reshape global race-, nation-, and class-based hierarchies.

By detailing the complexities of HCMC's global sex industry, I examine how desire shaped by technologies of embodiment shape and reshape various relations of intimacy, client self-conceptions, and workers' patterns of embodiment, including their performances of femininity. These masculinities and productive femininities that hinge on male desire are precarious precisely because of the rapid economic transformations occurring in the broader political economy. Consequently, I show that racialized desires, social status, business success, and hope for upward mobility are both realized and shattered in the bars of Ho Chi Minh City.

TRAFFICKED VICTIMS OR SHREWD ENTREPRENEURS

It is difficult to write a book on the global sex industry without addressing the issue of sex trafficking. A burgeoning literature examines the plight of women as victims of human trafficking or as forced participants in the global sex industry owing to dire economic conditions.

When I began my research in 2006, I also wanted, as a feminist researcher and scholar, to study “trafficked women,” or “victims” of the sex trade. However, I found that few of the women in my study were forced, duped, or coerced into the sex trade.

As far as I could tell, none of the workers I spoke with had been pressured by pimps or bar owners to have sex for money against their will. In fact, as I describe in more detail in chapter 5, the madams (locally referred to as *mommies*) in my study follow a strict moral code that prohibits them from taking a cut of their workers’ earnings from paid sex. *Mommies* earned their money through a combination of business profits from the bars, alcohol sales, and tips from the clients. As a result, workers’ autonomy and consent in the labor process were crucial to sustaining business across all four of the niche markets in this study.

While several scholars critically examine the issue of forced labor and human trafficking, I examine the broader structural conditions that shape the range of choices available to women as they enter the sex industry.³⁸ This book departs from the premise that all women in the sex industry are victims *forced* into the trade, or that they experience severe forms of labor exploitation, and instead follows the work of Denise Brennan, Rhacel Parreñas, and others by looking at women who *choose* to enter into sex work as a strategy to advance their economic and social positions in the local economy.³⁹ Many scholars of gender have shown that Third World women are frequently misrepresented as victims rather than as agents with motivations and desires that guide their actions.⁴⁰ Taking this work a step further, I illustrate how sex workers in HCMC act as astute entrepreneurs within existing structures of patriarchy.

For the women I studied who catered to wealthy local and other Asian businessmen, the sex industry allowed them to escape rural life and move into some of the most lavish spaces in Vietnam. These women earned more than white-collar professionals with master’s degrees who worked in local businesses. Workers who catered to Viet Kieu men and Western men were women who either originated from HCMC or had migrated to HCMC several years earlier. They had all worked in the service economy and in factories, earning less than a hundred U.S. dollars a month with no possibility of upward mobility. Sex work provided these women with opportunities to advance economically and to escape exploitative working conditions. Critically, these women were not victims of trafficking. They were free agents who could quit working at any time. But while women were able to capitalize on Vietnam’s rapid

development, it is important to situate their mobility as constrained within structures of patriarchy. That is to say, the women's mobility hinged on their ability to appeal to their male clients' desires. Nonetheless, the contemporary sex industry provides sex workers with differing pathways of upward mobility.

Finally, people often ask whether the sex workers and clients in my study practiced safe sex. This book is not about their sexual-health practices. However, I will say that the vast majority of men and women in my study indeed used protection. In fact, safe sex was part of the workers' negotiations with their clients because it enabled them to stay in the business longer. Male clients, moreover, often encouraged safe sexual practices in order to protect their wives and their other girlfriends and lovers in their complex social circles.

THE SETTING AND APPROACH

To study HCMC's sex industry, I conducted twenty-four months of ethnographic research in two main phases—2006–2007 and 2009–2010—along with monthlong follow-up visits in 2008 and 2012. In the first phase, I conducted seven months of field research on three niche markets that catered to Viet Kieu men, Western tourists in the backpackers' area, and poor local Vietnamese men.⁴¹ In the second phase, I returned to Vietnam to conduct another fifteen months of ethnography beginning in June 2009. In this phase, I built on the methodological approaches of Anne Allison, Tiantian Zheng, and Rhacel Parreñas by working as a hostess and bartender to better observe relationships among owners, mommies, police, clients, and sex workers in the bars and clubs.⁴² I also added two new types of clients to my study: wealthy Vietnamese men and their Asian business partners, and Western expatriates.⁴³ While conducting this new research, I revisited spaces that catered to Viet Kieu and Western budget travelers to examine how the sex industry had changed in the three years since Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization.

I chose to work in four different bars to capture the diversity of the male clients involved in HCMC's sex industry. These bars include Khong Sao Bar, which caters to wealthy local Vietnamese elites and their Asian business partners; Lavender, which caters to overseas Vietnamese men living in the Vietnamese diaspora; Secrets, which caters to Western transnational businessmen and expatriates; and Naughty Girls, which caters to Western budget travelers. Chapter 2 provides a much more detailed description of the four bars where I conducted research,

and I reflect on my research methods in depth in the methodological appendix.

Between 2006 and 2007, I interviewed 56 sex workers and 27 clients. Later, in 2009–2010, I interviewed 90 clients, 90 sex workers, 8 mommies, and 5 bar owners evenly distributed across four niche markets of HCMC’s sex industry. In total, this book is based on participant observation and in-depth and semistructured interviews with 276 individuals in Vietnam between 2006 and 2010. In the methodological appendix, I provide a detailed explanation of how I obtained access to each bar.

Before soliciting interviews that would delve into some of the most intimate details of their personal lives, I had to become familiar with my subjects. At *Khong Sao*, *Lavender*, and *Secrets*, I worked as a hostess and a bartender, serving drinks, sitting with clients, singing karaoke, and standing in the lineup as men chose the women to invite to their tables.⁴⁴ In all three bars, I typically worked a twelve-to-fourteen-hour shift seven days a week for roughly three months. I diligently wrote field notes each morning before returning to the bar. After nine months of this work, which required me to drink alcohol nightly with customers, I decided to scale back. In *Naughty Girls*, the lowest-status bar, I conducted three to four days of fieldwork each week as an observer rather than as a worker.

In all four bars, the first two weeks were dedicated to learning the culture and unspoken rules of each space, the names of my coworkers and regular clients, and recording copious field notes every night. Once I became a fixture in each bar, I began to systematically conduct informal interviews with my research participants. Interviews with the women usually took place “backstage” during downtime as we waited for clients to arrive or to be seated at a table.⁴⁵ I interviewed the men in a variety of settings—bars, coffee shops, their offices, and on car rides to project sites.

I prepared and memorized two interview guides, one for clients and one for sex workers, which allowed me to conduct two to three interviews per night. Each interview flowed as an informal conversation that lasted anywhere from two hours to seven hours. I began the interviews with basic background questions about where the participants were from, their occupations, their experiences prior to bar work or arrival in Vietnam, and their recent activities, such as traveling or working in Vietnam. I then began to ask intimate questions about their private lives, which included marriage and family life, extramarital affairs, and details about their relationships, emotional experiences, expectations, and anxieties about topics such as love, care, and deception.

MY DEALINGS WITH DESIRE

As a young graduate student looking to study globalization and gender, I was told by several senior sociologists not to study Vietnam. White men and good-hearted women of color alike warned me that a study of Vietnam would marginalize me either as an “area-studies scholar” or as someone who does “me-search.” As an Asian American woman in the academy, I have often felt like a triple minority: first as a woman, then as a Vietnamese American, and lastly as someone who has chosen to study men and women in Vietnam’s sex industry.

My beloved advisor Raka Ray once told me that every time I presented my work, I needed to make sure to desexualize my own body with suits or dresses that covered most of my skin. She told me that as an Asian American woman, I could not afford to give a presentation that was undertheorized, because a presentation that lacked theoretical and empirical rigor would allow audience members to ask questions about my positionality, sexualize my body, and ultimately delegitimize my project. She was right.

I have presented various pieces from this book numerous times in a variety of academic and public contexts. I have almost always received a question from someone in the audience asking, “So how far did you go for the sake of gathering data?” I understood this politely phrased question as a subtle way of asking whether I engaged in sex work. Each time someone asked this thinly coded question, I always wondered if male urban ethnographers were regularly asked if they partook in acts of violence, engaged in drug activity, or participated in sex work with and around their research participants.

Indeed, some of the classic ethnographies of our time have depended on ethnographers developing close and highly intimate relationships with their research subjects. While many of these ethnographers have been explicit about the fact that they did not sell drugs or engage in sex work during their fieldwork, it is often unclear whether the formation of their relationships in the field involved having sex with or doing drugs with their research subjects. Certain close relationships developed in the field are subject to greater scrutiny than others, depending on the gender, race, and class background of the research subjects and the researcher herself. The types of relationships that I had to develop in the field receive far more scrutiny than the types of relationships that other ethnographers develop, because of my gender and racial-ethnic background as well as those of my research subjects.

As I wrestled with these issues, I had what Randol Contreras refers to as a “standpoint crisis,” where I had to grapple with the contradictions of feminist standpoint work that calls on researchers to be reflexive of their own subject position in relation to their research subjects, as well as confront my own hesitancy in addressing the type of questions those audience members asked. I often felt as if those subtle remarks were a testament to the unspoken differential rewards and consequences for those racialized as “outsiders” and “insiders” in relation to their sites of study.⁴⁶

In his book *Stickup Kids*, an ethnography of drug robberies in the South Bronx, Contreras turns the feminist epistemology on its head by asking: who really benefits from a reflexive turn to address their positionality? Earlier feminists like Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith, and Patricia Hill Collins called on researchers to reflexively contextualize their unique race, class, and gender standpoints in situating their research. Yet twenty years later, I find myself asking why reflexivity benefits “objective outsiders” who dive into poor neighborhoods with people of color while simultaneously delegitimizing the very scholars of color studying poor communities who are really at the heart of feminist epistemological inquiry.

As I pondered these questions, I began to deconstruct my own impulse to answer “no” to the question Did you engage in sex work? By saying that I did not engage in sex work, I would delegitimize the work of many feminist scholars who came before me, like Wendy Chapkis, who did engage in sex work to advance research agendas on women and labor. Distancing myself from sex work would also inhibit feminist scholars emerging after me who might *choose* to engage in sex work to advance their own research agendas. Moreover, the question of whether I did or did not engage in sex work completely misses women’s experiences and overlooks the different kinds of emotional and bodily labors that sex workers performed outside of “sex-for-pay.” I strongly believe that it would be disrespectful to my research participants if I made some kind of claim about whether or not I engaged in a sex act for pay, because of the implied moral implications that accompany this statement. I do not believe that having sex for pay is shameful.

But what if I answered “yes”? While I have never been included in the club of “cowboy” ethnographers who study drugs, gangs, or violence, reviews of my work have always been lumped into that category of research. *Cowboy ethnography* is a term used informally among sociologists to loosely describe researchers who study dangerous or hard-to-reach poor populations, and who enable readers to go on voyeuristic journeys with them as they detail their heroic efforts to break into dangerous field

sites.⁴⁷ The phrase not only captures the informal gendered divides among male and female researchers “studying down,” but it also alludes to the ways that the academy valorizes male ethnographers while simultaneously delegitimizing female ethnographers studying illicit economies. Men are heroic researchers while women are sexualized objects both in the field and in the academy.⁴⁸ By answering “yes,” I would risk playing into these same exoticizing dynamics while simultaneously marginalizing myself and my research subjects.

In the end, I decided not to disclose whether I engaged in sex work. I have chosen to answer this question with another set of questions of my own: Why is it that when sex moves into the realm of pay that this intimate question suddenly becomes appropriate to ask? And why is this question, and others like it, used to scrutinize particular scholars, often scholars of color?

As a participant-observer in Vietnam’s global sex industry, I performed a deeply embodied ethnography in which I had to learn how to manage a broad array of relationships with the local police; the mafia members behind some of the bars; and the bar owners, madams, male clients, and female sex workers in these bars. For twelve to fourteen hours a day nearly seven days a week, I became engulfed in the Vietnamese sex industry, subjecting myself to submissive performances of femininity and an incredibly powerful male gaze that constructs notions of female desirability.

In order to make myself useful in my field sites, I had to do what most ethnographers are afraid to speak of—I had to engage in my own dealings with desire. Letting go of all the markers of respectability that I had acquired in the United States as a highly educated woman from prestigious universities, I engaged in a deeply embodied ethnography that transformed who I was. This external shift humbled me, brought me both great pain and great joy, and ultimately became the catalyst for an internal shift that altered the narrative of my research. The stories of the men and women I interviewed cast a new light on the sex industry and provided me with a deep sense of respect for the men and women whose honesty and friendship led to my greater understanding of the coconstitutive relationship between gender and global capital flows.

So many of the rich stories that fill these pages came with what I call an embodied cost. Some ethnographies are so deeply embodied that they forever transform the researcher conducting them. They color the way we see the world, manage our personal relationships, cope with pain, and experience the joy that comes with the deep connections we

build in the field. Over the course of several years, I learned how to theorize and ask big questions crucial to the formation of this book. However, I truly found my place in the world through my experiences in the field.

As an ethnographer, I entered into a space where I could experiment with different aspects of myself. Each bar required a different kind of embodied engagement, and it was in those spaces where I learned the tremendous power of humility and empathy that enabled me to dig deep within myself and others to pull out the stories that make up the empirical puzzle of this book. It was only by experiencing firsthand the subjective power of male desire—including feelings of utter invisibility and undesirability—that I could begin to understand why nearly all the women I worked with were willing to undergo surgical procedures to permanently alter their bodies.

And it was only by spending hours listening to men's aspirations and feelings of loss, failure, and loneliness that I could turn away from writing about these men solely in terms of sexual desire. In fact, this is not a book about sex or sexual relations; rather, men's and women's participation in HCMC's sex industry involves much more than the purchase of sex. Men purchase status and dignity as they work to protect their precarious—whether ascendant or declining—positions in the global order. As male clients and female sex workers interact, they reproduce hierarchies of desire and desirability in the mundane discourses and practices that construct new hierarchies in everyday life.

As I moved through the field site, I always knew that I could hit the eject button at any moment and put an end to my research. In this way, I was a temporary insider and forever an outsider, because my life and livelihood did not depend on my ability to be a successful hostess-worker. In a deliberate attempt to move away from voyeuristic ethnography, I have specifically chosen to focus this book on the experiences of my research subjects rather than write about my ethnographic journey. Aside from in this section of the book, I do not appear much throughout the text; this is a deliberate effort to place the stories of the men and women of my project at the heart of my analysis. In taking this turn, I hope that a new generation of male and female ethnographers will engage in a reflexive dialogue about the racialized, gendered, and classed relations that differentially reward and discipline white scholars, as opposed to scholars of color and male and female scholars from diverse class backgrounds. I also hope that more scholars of color will feel inspired and compelled to study, with theoretical depth and

empirical rigor, the very poor and marginalized communities that we were once told to stay away from because we bring a whole different set of sensitivities and insights worthy of academic scholarship.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book forges a new direction in studies of the relationship between sex work and the political economy in three ways. First, I show that sex work is not economically isolated from other industries but is coconstituted with local and global economic processes. Second, I illustrate how crucial HCMC's sex industry is to the development of the nation and the construction of new non-Western masculinities and femininities. Lastly, I show how sex workers activate the local market and contribute to Vietnam's dynamism by directly and indirectly facilitating the flow of foreign capital and overseas remittances into the country.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how HCMC's sex industry has transformed as Vietnam moved from French colonialism and U.S. interventionism culminating in the Vietnam War and a period of isolation to eventually opening its doors and becoming a player in the global economy. Chapter 2 describes the contemporary setting with an in-depth portrait of each of the four bars where I conducted my ethnography. Setting the stage, this chapter describes the organization of each workspace and the analytical puzzle that drives the remaining chapters of the book.

Chapter 3 delves into the coconstitution of gender and global capital to demonstrate how new capital flows create possibilities for men to renegotiate race-, class-, and gender-based hierarchies. By employing a relational analysis of four different niche markets of HCMC's sex industry, and contrasting the present arrangements to those in 2006, chapter 3 shows how male clients engage in a variety of practices to establish a sense of status within global hierarchies that were rendered unstable by the movement of both men and money between the First and Third Worlds. Local Vietnamese elites and Viet Kieus rely on female sex workers to contest Western superiority, while Westerners in this cityscape turn to a different set of hostess bars to affirm Western superiority.

Chapter 4 examines the social and economic trajectories of the mommies, who embody entrepreneurial success, defying common assumptions about sex workers as victims of human trafficking or economic exploitation. Chapter 5 highlights the importance of autonomy and consent in sex work by examining the moral codes in the labor process that influence sex workers' decisions to engage in sex work after leaving

factory work, domestic work, or other forms of service work. This chapter also illustrates the distinct relations of intimacy that emerge between men and women in different niche markets.

Chapter 6 introduces the concept of competing technologies of embodiment to show how sex workers' surgical and cosmetic bodily projects represent different perceptions of an emerging nation's divergent trajectories in the global economy. Sex workers construct desirable bodies that appeal to male clients' different projections of Vietnam's place in the global economy through three competing technologies of embodiment: pan-Asian modernity, nostalgic cosmopolitanism, and Third World dependency.

Finally, chapter 7 examines the varied trajectories of economic and social mobility that sex workers trace as they migrate from villages or move from factories or service-sector work into the sex industry. Sex work, I show, provides many poor urban and rural women with hope and pathways for mobility that would be unimaginable in factories, where women work twelve to thirteen hour days for less than a hundred U.S. dollars a month, which pales in comparison to the two hundred to seven hundred U.S. dollars a month they earn in paid sex work. Sex workers actively destigmatize their work by converting their urban income into social status and respectability in rural villages. Workers I interviewed sent remittances home and built new houses that fundamentally altered the physical landscape of their hometowns and local perceptions of their work.

Dealing in Desire takes seriously the labor of the women I studied. This book views women as, in the words of Caitrin Lynch, "creative agents in their own lives, not simply as pieces in some global monopoly played by capitalists and state representatives."⁴⁹ The bars of HCMC tell a story that extends far beyond intimate relations between men and women; these quotidian interactions provide a window into the racialized sexual desires, competing status claims, capitalist greed, and hope for economic mobility that drive sex workers and their clients into these bars, where shrewd deals are made to fulfill global fantasies.