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## Sex and Selfhood: What Feminist Philosophy Can Learn from Recent Ethnography in Ho Chi Minh City

By Mathew A. Foust<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article explores the connection of class dynamics to the moral agency of sex workers and their clients. It revisits the analyses of several contemporary feminist theorists, placing these analyses in dialogue with a recent ethnographic study of the sex work industry in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In light of this comparative analysis, it is argued that accurate understanding and assessment of the moral agency of sex workers and their clients requires attunement to the complex and evolving class dynamics within which each is situated. Thus, while traditional frameworks for approaching this subject are useful, they are ultimately inadequate.

*Keywords:* ethnography, feminist philosophy, moral agency, prostitution, sex work, Vietnam

### Introduction

Feminist discourse on sex workers<sup>2</sup> has traditionally been marked by a bifurcation in ways in which these women are perceived. In *Women, Sex, and the Law*, Rosemarie Tong labels the competing views, "Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman" and "Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman."<sup>3</sup> According to the former view, social and economic conditions force the woman to become an object with little or no control of her own destiny, subjected to violence and oppression from men who exert power over her. According to the latter view, the woman chooses her occupation, courageously defying social mores, attaining a kind of liberation via money or other benefits gained from men.

Recent feminist scholarship has complicated these traditional frameworks.<sup>4</sup> As Kamala Kempadoo highlights, many women who work in the sex trade in Third World and other non-

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<sup>2</sup> I will favor the term 'sex worker' rather than 'prostitute,' following the recent example of Hoang, whose ethnographic study of such individuals is engaged in this article. Although I will not enter the scholarly debate concerning the appropriateness of each term, I concur with Anna Carline, who claims, "This debate in itself demonstrates the powerful nature of names and illustrates that disputes regarding identity can lead to the development of new and more inclusive terms." See Anna Carline, "Constructing the Subject of Prostitution: A Butlerian Reading of the Regulation of Sex Work," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* (24): 61–78. (2011): 70.

<sup>3</sup> Rosemarie Tong, *Women, Sex, and the Law*. (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984): 49–55.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of related scholarship include: Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Christien van den Anker, "Trafficking and Women's Rights: Beyond the Sex Industry to 'Other Industries,'" *Journal of Global Ethics*, 2, no. 2 (2006): 163–182; Marjolein van der Veen, "Rethinking Commodification and Prostitution: An Effort at Peacemaking in the Battles over Prostitution," *Rethinking Marxism* 13, no. 1 (2001): 30–51; Julia O'Connell Davidson, *Prostitution, Power and Freedom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Laurie Shrage, "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 347–361.

Western countries, including Asia, would have us understand prostitution in a different light, “as work within a clearly defined industry, as a survival strategy, or as a way of making do when other options are limited or closed.”<sup>5</sup> On Kempadoo’s account, sex workers occupy a complex space in which they inhabit a number of roles, identities, and experiences. They live not solely as subjects of oppression nor solely as liberated subjects, but as persons capable of making choices and decisions that lead to transformations of consciousness and to changes in everyday life—even when such transformations and changes are resistances to, and contestations of, oppressive and exploitative structures and regimes.<sup>6</sup> This refiguring of the ways in which the agency of sex workers is conceived prompts Kempadoo to assert, “It is from this complex matrix and with a willingness to listen and learn from Third World sex workers’ praxis that we must begin to rethink and reconceptualize prostitution.”<sup>7</sup>

It might be said that Kempadoo’s challenge to listen and learn from sex workers’ praxis as a key to rethinking and reconceptualizing prostitution is accepted by Kimberly Kay Hoang, in her recent ethnographic study of sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Hoang holds that “there are porous boundaries in the relations between sex workers and their clients that depend on the strata they occupy.”<sup>9</sup> Hoang analyzes both sides of the client-worker relationship in three racially and economically diverse sectors of Ho Chi Minh City’s sex industry—a low-end sector catering to poor local Vietnamese men, a mid-tier sector catering to white backpackers, and a high-end sector catering to overseas Vietnamese men. Hoang argues that sex work in the low-end sector involves economic exchanges while sex work in the mid-tier and high-end sectors are relational and intimate exchanges developed through the continuous interactions that tie customers to sex workers.

This essay engages Hoang’s study vis-à-vis contemporary feminist theory, showing that accurate assessment of the moral agency of sex workers and their clients requires attunement to the complex and evolving class dynamics within which each is situated. Consequently, it is argued that the traditional dichotomy of “Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman” versus “Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman” is less helpful as a framework for addressing the question of the moral agency of sex workers than it is typically taken to be. Instead, taking the lead of scholars such as Kempadoo and Hoang, we must continue to listen and learn from sex

<sup>5</sup> Kamala Kempadoo, “Slavery or Work? Reconceptualizing Third World Prostitution,” *positions* 7 (1), 1999: 225-237 (225).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 232–233.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, “Slavery or Work?,” 234.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of related scholarship include: Susan Dewey and Patty Kelly, eds., *Policing Pleasure: Sex Work, Policy, and the State in Global Perspective* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011); Denise Brennan, “Sex Tourism and Sex Workers’ Aspirations,” in *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry*, ed. Ronald Weitzer (New York and London: Routledge, 2010); Nicole Constable, “The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex, and Reproductive Labor,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 49–64; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Patty Kelly, *Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008); Hsiu-hua Shen, “The Purchase of Transnational Intimacy: Women’s Bodies, Transnational Masculine Privileges in Chinese Economic Zones,” *Asian Studies Review* 32 (2008): 57–75; Elizabeth Bernstein, “Sex Work for the Middle Classes,” *Sexualities* 10, no. 4 (2007): 473–488; Teela Sanders, *Sex Work: A Risky Business* (UK: Willan Publishing, 2005); Denise Brennan, *What’s Love Got to Do with It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); Fouzia Saeed, *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Kay Hoang, “‘She’s Not a Low-Class Dirty Girl!’: Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam,” *Contemporary Ethnography* 40, no. 4 (2011): 367–396 (368).

workers' practice. After all, one cannot hope to ameliorate the conditions of persons whose situations one does not fully understand.

### **Quintessentially Oppressed, Quintessentially Liberated**

Several feminists have regarded the prostitute as the quintessential oppressed woman. For Andrea Dworkin, the matter is nothing short of self-evident:

Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body. Those of us who say this are accused of being simpleminded. But prostitution is very simple . . . . In prostitution, no woman stays whole. It is impossible to use a human body in the way women's bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it. And no woman gets whole again later, after.<sup>10</sup>

Should one grant Dworkin's description of prostitution but allege that the woman in question freely chooses to subject herself to such treatment, Dworkin will insist otherwise: "This should not have to be said but it has to be said: prostitution comes from male dominance, not from female nature. It is a political reality that exists because one group of people has and maintains power over another group of people."<sup>11</sup>

The opposing view, that of prostitute as quintessential liberated woman, finds representation in the words of Priscilla Alexander, who writes, "The antiprostitution feminists define prostitution per se as a violation of (women's) human rights. The sex workers' rights movement defines state repression of prostitutes as the human rights violation."<sup>12</sup> Elaborating on the perspective of proponents of sex workers' rights over and against antiprostitution feminists, Alexander explains, "...the whore label, the whore stigma, and the laws against prostitution—the setting of financial terms for sex—come at us another way. They deny us the right to signal an interest in sex, initiate sex, or agree to have sex if we set economic terms for it."<sup>13</sup> Unlike Dworkin's view of prostitution as a token of political dominance over women, Alexander views the prohibition of prostitution as a token of economic dominance over women.

The freedom and agency of the prostitute is a clear point of contention between advocates of the notion of Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman and advocates of the notion of Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman. Dworkin regards the prostitute as bereft of freedom in her prostitution, whereas Alexander views the prostitute as asserting freedom in her prostitution. In the estimation of Melanie Simmons, another feminist addressing the issue, the line between coercion and choice is decidedly fuzzy. "The difference in levels of analysis—individual versus institutional—helps explain the incommensurability of language that blurs the distinction between choice and coercion." In other words, while on one hand, it may be that the prostitute freely chooses to be a prostitute, on the other, if this choice is a result of conditions

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 141.

<sup>11</sup> Dworkin, *Life and Death*, 149.

<sup>12</sup> Priscilla Alexander, "Feminism, Sex Workers, and Human Rights," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997): 83–97 (84).

<sup>13</sup> Nagle, "Feminism, Sex Workers, and Human Rights," 85.

requiring one to choose from among a range of lesser and greater evils, accepting prostitution as a lesser evil “may be capitulation or survival and therefore not a genuinely free choice.”<sup>14</sup>

The lack of consensus surrounding the agency, or lack thereof, of prostitutes and the extent to which prostitution oppresses or liberates the prostitute calls for closer analysis of the *experience* of the prostitute. This is a major benefit of ethnographic work such as that of Hoang. When we turn to Hoang’s study of sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City, we will find that the status of their agency defies neat categorization. Sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City are typically neither Prostitutes as Quintessential Oppressed Women nor Prostitutes as Quintessential Liberated Women. Instead, they occupy various spaces in a continuum between these extremes.

### Sex and Selfhood

Before turning to Hoang’s study of sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City, it will be useful to demarcate just what is at stake in the debate concerning whether sex workers are quintessentially oppressed or quintessentially liberated. This debate is multifaceted; an exhaustive enumeration of the points of contention would by itself fill several pages. At the core of the debate, however, is what Julia O’Connell Davidson dubs “the vexed relationship between sex and selfhood.”<sup>15</sup> What the sex worker sells is a distinctively different sort of commodity than what most other types of worker sell. The sex worker sells *herself* (or, more rarely, *himself*). The vexed nature of the relationship between sex and selfhood is immediately apparent. It appears peculiar, on at least two fronts, for one to *choose* to sell *oneself*. For one, selling oneself seems a deliberate act of self-abnegation. While one receives some sort of remuneration, it would seem that transferring one’s selfhood to another would never appear to be ‘worth it.’ Relatedly, it would seem that such a transfer could not, despite appearances, be chosen. Relinquishing one’s selfhood to another would seem to be an act performed of coercion—whether by an individual, a group, or circumstances conditioned by a variety of economic, cultural, and social factors. At most, it would seem to be a freely chosen ‘last resort’ option, an occupation undertaken in desperation in order to avoid otherwise disastrous circumstances. Those of the Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman camp would be quick to note the elasticity of “freely chosen” in the preceding sentence; when the choice is between oppression and death, one’s opting for the former hardly constitutes a free choice. As Martha C. Nussbaum puts the point, sex workers “may fulfill internal conditions of autonomy, being capable of making bargains, reflecting about what to do, and so on. But none of this counts for a great deal, if in fact the struggle for survival gives them just one unpleasant option, or a small set of (in various ways) unpleasant options.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Melanie Simmons, “Theorizing Prostitution: The Question of Agency,” in *Sex Work & Sex Workers* (Sexuality & Culture Vol. 2), eds. Barry Michael Dank and Roberto Refinetti (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 125-148 (146).

<sup>15</sup> Julie O’Connell Davidson, “The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution,” *Hypatia* 17, no. 2 (2002): 84–98 (87).

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum is here appropriating—toward the same point about the autonomy of sex workers that I am here making—an example of Joseph Raz’s concerning a “hounded woman” on a deserted island who is constantly pursued by a man-eating animal. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 296. Carolyn Pateman also finds specious the notion of sex workers freely choosing their work, stating: “Free love and prostitution are poles apart. Prostitution is the use of a woman’s body by a man for his own satisfaction. There is no desire or satisfaction on the part of the prostitute. Prostitution is not mutual, pleasurable exchange of the use of bodies, but the unilateral use of a woman’s body by a man in exchange for money.” Carolyn Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 198.

Those of the Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman camp would contend that the sex worker does not relinquish selfhood; on the contrary, in the transaction with the client, the sex worker expresses and even fortifies her selfhood. As Susan J. Brison observes, “Pro-pornography-and-prostitution feminists such as Nina Hartley, Susie Bright, and Annie Sprinkle consider themselves to have freely chosen their profession—and have argued that their choices have enhanced *other* women’s freedom.”<sup>17</sup> The sex worker does what she wishes and collects payment for it, successfully performing her chosen form of skilled labor in the face of social disapprobation. As such, she is not merely a site of autonomy, but a beacon of it. Other women who, lacking in courage or determination, allow their choices of profession to be shaped by cultural and social norms and expectations, may find liberating inspiration in the example of the woman sex worker. On this line of thinking, the selfhood of sex workers is characterized by a robustness missing in those attracted to this profession who nonetheless recoil for fear of suffering alienation, ostracism, or other harms at the hands of members of their various communities.

Additional questions emerge. However we answer the question of whether sex workers freely choose their work, we are led to ask whether individuals *should be able to* engage in sex work. That is, we may ask whether the institution, or practice, of sex work ought to be prohibited or normalized. Serious consideration of this question involves gauging and weighing costs and benefits of various kinds—economic, social, and ethical—as incurred by various parties, to prudently determine effective public policy. In one such analysis, Scott A. Anderson asserts:

Prohibition [of prostitution] not only denies individuals the choice to sell sex for money, it also signals that no one should be expected to make choices about sex just to escape economic hardship [...] The prohibition on prostitution is, as much as anything, a restriction on what kinds of pressures or circumstances society will permit to bear on its members’ sexual choices. It thus helps support the assertion of a right to sexual autonomy—something that does not depend on a person’s command of economic or political resources—and thereby helps us to see that a prostitute’s loss of sexual autonomy is a matter of social injustice.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of normalization, however, sexual autonomy is jeopardized:

By contrast, normalizing prostitution would tend to undercut claims that sexual autonomy is a right and instead would make a prostitute’s loss of sexual autonomy appear to be a matter of her choice of career—in part, a matter of *just how much* she values her sexual autonomy.<sup>19</sup>

These remarks betoken the complexity of the relationship between sex and selfhood as it bears on debates surrounding sex work. In Anderson’s estimation, which is by no means idiosyncratic, prohibition of sex work—patently a restriction on the acts of sex workers and would-be sex workers—is deemed liberating while normalization of sex work is deemed oppressive.

<sup>17</sup> Susan J. Brison, “Contentious Freedom: Sex Work and Social Construction,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 192–200 (197, emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> Scott A. Anderson “Prostitution and Sexual Autonomy,” *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 748–780.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 777 (emphasis in original).

Importantly, Anderson's advocacy of prohibition over and against normalization is shaped, in part, by consideration of the experiences of sex workers: "Looking at the lives of prostitutes in particular, especially the women at the poorer end of the economic spectrum, it is clear that they do not exercise sexual autonomy in their sex work."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, these women are "subject to harms that society ordinarily makes great efforts to protect its members from [...] While some find the work easy and unobjectionable, even sometimes pleasant, many women find the work degrading or disgusting, their customers vile, and their sense of self-worth to be very low."<sup>21</sup> Consistent with this facet of Anderson's analysis, I believe that more light can be shed on the relation between autonomy and sex work by a closer look at the lives of sex workers. Ethnographic studies such as Hoang's study of sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City serve this purpose well.

### Sex Workers in Ho Chi Minh City

Hoang's ethnographic field research occurred in several intervals from 2006–2010 and involved her interviewing and observing sex workers and their clients in local bars, cafés, malls, restaurants, sex workers' homes, and on the streets, as well as private spaces and enclosed karaoke bars catering to wealthy Vietnamese entrepreneurs and Asian businessmen. All of the sex workers studied were women over the age of eighteen, none of whom were trafficked or forced into prostitution. Rather, they "*chose* to enter sex work as independent agents."<sup>22</sup> Hoang outlines three publicly visible sectors of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City: the low-end, mid-tier, and high-end sectors. Common to these sectors is the presence of sex-for-money exchanges between sex worker and client. Differing among these sectors are the durations of their respective relations, and what Hoang refers to as the economic, bodily, and cultural capitals at stake.<sup>24</sup> I will summarize Hoang's descriptions of each of these sectors in turn. As I do so, I will interpret the situation of the sex worker in terms of the debate between feminist theorists concerning the agency of the sex worker. While I will employ the dichotomous framework of Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman versus Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman, I will highlight ways in which this framework is inadequate in capturing the experience of the sex workers in question.

In the low-end sector, poor rural and urban women exchange sex for money from local Vietnamese men in short, typically one-time interactions. The sex workers studied by Hoang engage in these transactions in brothels disguised as barbershops, located in areas that are roughly forty-five minutes from the main business district of Ho Chi Minh City. Men pay approximately three U.S. dollars for an orgasm within a twenty-minute interaction. This price yields a substantially higher income than that which women in this sector would earn working in local restaurants, legitimate barbershops, or as house cleaners.<sup>25</sup> Lacking economic and cultural

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 775–776.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 776.

<sup>22</sup> Because sex work is illegal in Vietnam, the sex workers never explicitly referred to themselves as such, opting instead for "*gai di khach*" (girls who accompany customers) rather than "*gai ma dam*" (prostitutes or sex workers).

<sup>23</sup> Hoang, "Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City," 374 (emphasis in original).

<sup>24</sup> Hoang borrows 'economic capital' and 'cultural capital' from Pierre Bourdieu and 'body capital' from Elizabeth Bernstein.

<sup>25</sup> "On average, women earned hundred dollars per month, which was forty to fifty dollars more" than they would earn in the aforementioned occupations. Hoang, "Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City," 376.

resources, they are unable to enter higher-paying sectors such as District One, the central business district of Ho Chi Minh City.

Hoang quotes Dung, a thirty-four-year-old single mother of two working as a sex worker in the low-tier sector as explaining, “I am old. I have a kid. I don’t look pretty. I don’t speak English or even know how to get to those places [...] I don’t have the clothes or money to walk around in those kinds of bars so I could never work there.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the money earned by sex workers in the low-tier sector is spent on necessities such as housing, food, and schooling for their children. Although they were not forced into sex work, many entered and continued to do this work as a means to escape poverty. Still, low-tier sex workers are “among the most vulnerable and the most exploited,”<sup>27</sup> having little choice of which clients they service and limited control over what services they provide. While low-tier sex workers attempt to make men ejaculate through means other than intercourse, if unsuccessful, they engage in intercourse, whether or not condoms are available.<sup>28</sup> This work, in its entirety, is often so disgusting to sex workers, that they are compelled to vomit. Occasionally sex workers cry to each other “because they are engaged in the kind of work that ‘only women at the bottom of society do.’”<sup>29</sup>

The low-end sector of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City is that which shares the greatest affinity with the conception of sex work typically discussed by those of the Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman camp. Sex workers are paid little in exchange for their services, and often, if not most of the time, find the work unappealing, if not repugnant. They become sex workers and remain sex workers motivated by the desire to escape poverty. It would seem that sex workers such as Dung are akin to those alluded to by Nussbaum, for whom the struggle for survival reveals just one unpleasant option, or a small set of (in various ways) unpleasant options. In this case, the unpleasant alternative options are occupations that garner substantially smaller wages. While these occupations may very well not be conducive toward the effort to extricate oneself from poverty, they appear to be free of the significant psychic and physical costs associated with sex work in the low-tier sector. At the least, there is most certainly less in the way of such costs to be incurred in these lines of work. In opting not to work at a legitimate barbershop, a restaurant, or as a house cleaner, low-tier sex workers appear to *choose* work that is in certain ways restrictive and quite often demeaning for the sake of wages that allow them (and as is often the concern, their families) to subsist above the threshold of poverty. Hoang’s care to point out that none of the sex workers she interviewed—even in the low-tier sector—were forced into sex work, but instead opted to enter sex work as independent agents, suggests that sex workers such as Dung do not fit under the category, Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman. At the same time, it is intelligible to counter that despite not being *forced* into sex work, the choice to enter sex work comes about only as the result of a complex set of circumstances shaped by factors well beyond the control of individual women like Dung, and that the choice to be a sex worker is borne of relegation, not freedom. In that case, even if the low-tier sex worker is not to be construed as Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman, by no means should she be construed as Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 377. Hoang notes that her conversations with women in the low-end sector took place in Vietnamese. The quotations are her English translations.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>28</sup> Condoms cost roughly forty cents each, a price that low-end sector sex workers consider very expensive. Moreover, if police should find condoms in a barbershop, they have grounds for arrest for prostitution. Ibid., “Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City,” 378–379.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 378.



In the mid-tier sector, sex workers are women who are poor by city standards but possess more economic resources than those of the low-tier sector. While sex is exchanged for money in the mid-tier sector, the transactions between sex worker and client involve cultural capital, as well. Clients are typically white Americans, Europeans, or Australians who have traveled to the “backpacker” area of Ho Chi Minh City, known as the central location for foreigners traveling on a budget. These men regard themselves as savvy travelers in search of an ‘authentic’ Vietnamese experience. Consequently, while the relations between sex worker and client may begin as short-term sex-for-money exchanges, cultural capital is frequently part of the exchange in the mid-tier sector. Sex workers in the mid-tier sector can speak some English, learning the language by talking to overseas men in bars and, in some cases, spending earnings on formal English-language classes. With clients visiting Vietnam for an extended time, sex workers often engage in relational exchanges, in which they serve as tour guide and cultural broker. Sometimes these exchanges develop into remittance relationships after the clients leave Vietnam, as well as developing into complicated boyfriend–girlfriend relationships. Indeed, nearly all of the sex workers in this sector have multiple ‘boyfriends,’ often with the hope that one will facilitate their migration abroad. Consideration of one such case will be illustrative.

Hoang details the case of Linh, a mid-tier sex worker, and James, an Australian client, who met in December 2005 while James was on a holiday in Vietnam. Linh and James continued to engage in a relationship beyond this visit, communicating via long-distance cellular phone text messages and e-mails. Linh fabricated stories of calamities that had befallen her and her aspiration to open a café in order to become self-sufficient, prompting James to deposit “several chunks of money ranging from five hundred to five thousand dollars in her bank account to help her through these crises, in addition to monthly remittances of three hundred dollars a month to pay for English lessons and beauty school.”<sup>30</sup> James sympathized with Linh, stating, “as a first-world man with so much privilege, I felt that it was important to help.”<sup>31</sup> Unknown to James, Linh was being helped through these “crises” by two other overseas clients. Each client was under the impression that he was Linh’s only boyfriend. Nonetheless, Linh and James were married in 2007, and after a year and a half, Linh was granted a visa to migrate to Australia. When asked whether Linh loves James, Linh replied, “We go through a lot together to get visa and he work so hard for it. Now I love him, yes. *Trong doi nay hen sui thoi, em cam thay rat ma man.* (In life it is all about luck, I feel really lucky).”<sup>32,33</sup> As Hoang observes, the relationship between Linh and James illuminates how sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City’s mid-tier “self-consciously traverse the border between the (economic) transactional and the intimate spheres.”<sup>34</sup>

The mid-tier sector of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City deviates substantially from the typical narrative of the exchange between sex worker and client. That narrative neatly describes the exchange as that of the client paying money for the services of the sex worker and the sex worker receiving money for services performed. In the mid-tier sector, however, that which is exchanged is not limited to money and sex. Indeed, nonsexual forms of assistance and companionship are salient features of transactions between sex worker and client in the mid-tier sector. Sex workers such as Linh facilitate and enhance the travel experiences of foreign clients

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>32</sup> As Hoang indicates, Linh mixed Vietnamese and English in her response.

<sup>33</sup> Hoang, “Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City,” 384.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 384–385.

such as James, while receiving additional money and gifts. Given the extended time spent together in nonsexual activities, the relation between sex worker and client in the mid-tier sector blurs the line between sex worker-client and girlfriend-boyfriend—especially when the two remain in contact beyond the time that the client is in Ho Chi Minh City. James’s avowed sympathy for Linh, and Linh’s avowed love for James—even if felt only after a good deal of time together—indicate mutually felt care between the two. Clearly, Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman does not here apply. In fact, in the case of a sex worker who deceives several clients into thinking that they are her sole boyfriend, in order to extort financial assistance in fictitious times of disaster, one might be inclined to sympathize at least as much with the client as the sex worker! I would give pause, however, before concluding that sex workers in the mid-tier sector of Ho Chi Minh City are best described under the heading, Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman. Attending closely to Linh’s testimony, it seems that there is indeed significant liberation in being afforded the opportunity to migrate to Australia; she is enabled to pursue a meaningful life unencumbered by the socioeconomic hardships of Ho Chi Minh City. At the same time, Linh’s remark concerning her love of James suggests a tentativeness that has been ‘overcome’ out of gratitude for his persistence in being a catalyst to her emigration. Perhaps Linh’s love for James is, in fact, free of reservation or hesitation. One imagines, however, that there are several cases in which sex workers convince themselves that they are in love with a client, or simply feel beholden to a client, having received as much as they have from the client in question. In such a case, the sex worker would not be accurately described under the heading, Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman.

In the high-end sector, sex workers come from relatively wealthy families, and are not lacking in economic and cultural capital. Most have a college or university degree, and many have well-respected jobs that pay salaries relatively high by Ho Chi Minh City standards. In addition, some receive supplemental money from parents. The clientele of these sex workers are wealthy *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) in search of young, desirable women. As Hoang explains, “Although women in the high-end sector often received money from their clients, sex workers and clients both framed the transfer of money as a *gift*, never as a form of *payment*, and most definitely not as a way to help save women from poverty.”<sup>35</sup>

Ngoc is a sex worker in the high-end sector whose “social, cultural, economic and physical advantages allowed her to move with ease in spaces where high-end *Viet Kieu* men spent their time and money.”<sup>36</sup> One of her clients, Tuan, is a *Viet Kieu* from France who had worked as an orthodontist for fifteen years in France before returning to Vietnam to open a practice. When interviewed by Hoang, Tuan explained that he is almost forty years old, not ready to settle down with anyone, but also not wanting to spend his days alone. So, he spends his time “with girls who are sort of working,” stating: “[...] I know that I have to buy her things and spend money on her. Otherwise, she won’t waste her time with me. I can’t be with just any girl, either. I need to be with someone who is young and beautiful. When you go out in Vietnam, people see you. If you have money, you can’t have a cheap girl.”<sup>3738</sup> As for Ngoc, unlike mid-tier sex workers, she has no desire to develop relationships that could result in

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 386 (emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., “Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City,” 388 (emphasis in original).

<sup>37</sup> Tuan also says, “When I spend five hundred dollars on a good bottle of Rémy [Martin], people notice it. The same happens with girls. When I am with a young pretty woman who other men want, I don’t mind spending money on her for expensive things [...] Besides, when other people see her with an expensive phone or handbag, it makes me look good.” Ibid., 390.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 389.

marriage and migration. Characteristic of sex workers in the high-end sector, Ngoc wishes to remain in Vietnam, claiming, “In Vietnam, when you have money, you can afford everything [...] Life here is just so much easier if you have money. If my family was poor, I think I would want to marry someone who will take me to the U.S., so that I could live a better life. I am not poor. Why would I give up this life?”<sup>39</sup>

In the high-end sector, sex workers often withhold the physical act of sex, projecting the image that they are high-end women who would not engage in sex with just anyone. When they do have sex, the women lead the client to believe that they are their monogamous partners, although this is typically not the case. Sex workers in the high-end sector deploy their looks, money, skills, and status for further material gain from several clients, while clients deploy their monetary capital largely for the benefit of being seen publically with these women, who very effectively conceal their status as sex workers, instead appearing to be girlfriends of their clients. Indeed, sex workers from the high-end sector are more able to disguise the nature of their relationships to their clients as girlfriend-boyfriend relations because they already can afford to pay for drinks and services in the high-end locales at which they spend time with their clients.

The high-end sector of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City differs dramatically from the conception of sex work depicted in the notion of Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman. Sex workers in this sector elect to perform this work not of necessity, nor of the desire to leave Vietnam, but because they enjoy the comforts of a wealthy lifestyle sustainable by income from their clients. Indeed, these sex workers already live comfortably; their choice to engage in sex work is the *result* of economic comfort, at most aimed at *preserving* this comfort, rather than *securing* it. Moreover, high-end sex workers such as Ngoc determine whether and under what conditions they will have sex with their clients, as well as whether and under what conditions they will sustain relations with clients. Trung, a *Viet Kieu* client of a high-end sex worker describes his knowing that “I had to give her stuff or she would just go with a richer guy.” When the sex worker asked him to buy her a motorbike, he offered to buy a model valued at two thousand dollars, “but she told me that a woman like her could not be seen driving a cheap bike around because people would look at her and judge her.” At his refusal to meet her request for a motorbike valued at nine thousand dollars, the relationship ended: “I said no, and that’s it—we were over. She stopped answering my phone calls and text messages.”<sup>40</sup> Sex workers in the high-end sector of Ho Chi Minh City most clearly qualify for the label of Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman. The sex worker is more powerful in this relation than the client, and freely exerts that power over him when and how she sees fit.

## Conclusion

One argument commonly advanced against sex work claims that it is morally wrong because it contributes to perpetuating a pervasive form of inequality. Allowing sex work to occur, it is suggested, signals approval of the objectification and oppression of women. Some—such as Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), an American sex worker activist organization—respond by holding that sex work does the opposite, challenging debilitating stereotypes of women, and in turn, empowering them. In a defense of the former position, Debra Satz writes, “I do not believe that ethnographic studies of prostitution would support COYOTE’s

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 391.

claim that prostitution contributes to images of women's dignity and equal standing."<sup>41</sup> Having just considered such an ethnographic study, we may competently weigh in on Satz's claim. Does sex work in Ho Chi Minh City contribute to, or do damage to, images of women's dignity and equal standing?

Attempting a reply though the traditional binary framework, we are mostly at a loss. With the exception of sex workers in the high-end sector—who seem to fit the mold of Prostitute as Quintessential Liberated Woman—sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City are not neatly classifiable as oppressed or as liberated. Instead, they are at once oppressed and liberated. It does seem, of course, that sex workers of the low-tier sector are more oppressed and thus less liberated than sex workers of the mid-tier sector. Perhaps, then, images of women's dignity and equal standing are more harmed by low-tier sex workers than mid-tier sex workers, and more harmed by mid-tier sex workers than high-end sex workers. Still, the matter may not be so simple. Action construed as betokening oppression might further images of women's dignity and equal standing by being understood as modes of sacrifice and perseverance necessary to achieve these ends. Likewise, action construed as betokening liberation might be injurious to images of women's dignity and equal standing by being understood as forms of turning the oppressed into the oppressor (or at least into deceiver or despot).

It is worth recognizing that Hoang's focus was on those who "chose" to be sex workers, and who navigated visible sectors of the sex work industry in Ho Chi Minh City. This allows for the possibility, of course, of sex workers who are unequivocally forced to be sex workers, perhaps occupying concealed sectors of the sex work industry in Ho Chi Minh City. Such a stratum of sex work is clearly made up of sex workers fitting the heading, Prostitute as Quintessential Oppressed Woman. In most observable cases, however, there is nothing *quintessential* about sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City. Recent ethnographic studies of other locations seem to corroborate these findings.<sup>42</sup> If feminist philosophy wishes to learn from lessons from ethnography about prostitution, then a first important lesson is to shed the essentialist binary distinction that tends to frame the debate in favor of recognition of the multifaceted nature of the agency of sex workers. To suggest this is nothing other than to suggest that justice be done to those for whom feminist philosophers, on whichever side of the debate, desire for justice to be done.

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<sup>41</sup> Deborah Satz, "Markets in Women's Sexual Labor," *Ethics* 106, no. 1 (1995): 63–85 (80).

<sup>42</sup> For a review of some of these studies, see Ronald Weitzer, "The Ethnography of Prostitution: New International Perspectives," *Contemporary Sociology* 39 (2010): 262–269.