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Treading water: Street sex workers negotiating frantic presents and speculative futures in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Abstract

Structural conditions shape the temporalities that govern the lives of street sex workers operating in Châu Đốc, a small town in Southern Vietnam. These women live each day as they come and make decisions based on quick returns and the management of daily needs, prioritizing short-term solutions over planning for the future. The ethnographic study of the multiple temporalities that govern street sex work, family care, gambling and debt-juggling practices shows that these women live in a frantic present-oriented temporality that is filled with pressing tasks and routines. This leads to an uncertain future that engenders various forms of hopeful and speculative behaviour, but precludes systematic planning. As a result, these women are treading water: putting effort into keep themselves afloat but never furthering their status and lives or catching up with the currents of development and progress. Overall, this article argues that this day-to-day lifestyle goes hand in hand with the linear and future-oriented time of capitalism and wage-labour that has infiltrated everyday life in post-reform Vietnam.

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Time, temporality, present-ness, capitalism, precarity, sex work, care, gambling, debt, Vietnam

It is another humid morning in Châu Đốc, a small town bordering Cambodia in the Western part of the Mekong Delta, Southern Vietnam. Tiên, 18 years old, wakes up and takes her mother to a cafe for breakfast.[1] Her mother, a ruined moneylender, is unemployed, ill and indebted. Tiên's father is deceased, so she and her siblings take care of their mother. Tiên, the middle child, left school when she was nine, sold her virginity at 15 and works as a street sex worker and lottery seller. Her elder sister also works as a sex worker, but in Phnom Penh. Their youngest sibling sells lottery tickets in Châu Đốc. After dropping off her mother, Tiên buys 20 lottery tickets on credit in the hopes of selling them during the day. She then joins her fellow sex workers in a park where she solicits clients. Between clients, she discusses her dreams of the previous night with friends to determine the numbers that she will wager on today. When her peak working period is over, she begins visiting her usual round of cafes to sell lottery tickets. A client buys two tickets and makes sexual advances. She takes him to a guesthouse for a quick service. Half an hour later, she takes her mother home for lunch. On the way, they buy cooked food – two bowls of rice and a meagre portion of vegetables and eggs. It is now midday and the heat is stifling, leaving them no option but to take a nap. They wake up at 2 p.m., just in time to play roulette with the neighbours. Today's game brings Tiên a few thousand *đồng*. At 4 p.m., the game stops and the neighbourhood gathers around the radio to listen to the results of the lottery. Tiên checks her unsold tickets: she is unlucky today, but the neighbours won money last week. At 5 p.m., two moneylenders come to collect their daily debt payment; this is a stressful moment because one of them is asking for the payment of a loan that her mother defaulted on and Tiên is expected to pay for it. She then visits an illegal lottery bookie to place some bets. It is now 6:30 p.m., and after dinner with her mother, Tiên gets ready for the evening's work. She puts on jeans and a sequined tee-shirt, and applies makeup before rushing off to join her colleagues at the park. A long evening awaits her. She will have to provide sexual services to several men to make enough money for the next day's expenses, all while making sure not to draw unwanted attention from the local police.

Like many other street sex workers operating in small provincial towns of the Mekong delta in Southern Vietnam, Tiên lives a precarious life as a result of labour insecurity, income volatility and social marginalization. Her days are full: she combines casual part-time jobs, manages personal

and family finances, provides care to her mother, allocates time to relationships, gambles fervently, and juggles with informal loans. Street sex workers like her commit to living each day as guided by immediate constraints and desires, obligations and opportunities. They make decisions based on quick returns and the management of daily needs, prioritizing short-term solutions over planning for the future. This article contributes to the understanding of this type of day-to-day living, which stands in contrast to the linear and future-oriented time of capitalism that has infiltrated everyday life in post-reform Vietnam. As illustrated by the example above, the chronological, rational and monetized time that rules the market economy has not become a fixture in the lives of street sex workers.

By studying the main temporalities that structure their lives – that of street sex work and family care, gambling practices and juggling with debts – this article shows that these women live in a frantic and anxiety-ridden present-oriented time that is filled with pressing tasks and routines. This leads to an uncertain future that engenders hopeful and speculative behaviour, but which precludes systematic planning. As a result, sex workers are submerged in present-ness, a temporal regime that generates anxiety and pleasure, exclusion and belonging, empowerment and disempowerment. While they believe in the promises made by the market including improved livelihoods and wealth, they struggle to find a way to achieve these goals and become "modern" economic subjects despite their industry. In other words, they are frantically treading water: putting effort into keeping themselves afloat but never furthering their status and lives or catching up with the currents of development and progress. I argue that the empirical study of this temporal regime contributes to the growing body of work that examines the temporalities that inform the lives of precarious and dispossessed workers, in particular regimes of present-ness that are externally imposed on them. In particular, I draw upon scholarly literature on present-ness in order to explore the intertwining temporalities of labour, care, gambling and debt, an endeavour that has not often been undertaken in ethnographies in transitional countries. In doing so, I propose a model for conceptualizing the temporalities that inform the lives of marginalized groups in the global South. Moreover, I argue that the linear, cumulative and future-oriented time of capitalist production, and the cyclic, reproductive and present-oriented time of precarious workers, are co-constitutive of modern capitalism.

Present-ness should not be essentialized or reduced to a normative concept for it is situated in specific historical and economic contexts and manifests itself in different ways. Some new age spiritual traditions inspired by Buddhist teachings encourage living in the present moment and

avoiding the painful delusion of past and future time to attain everyday mindfulness (Eckhart, 1999). In contrast to these ideas of liberation, present-ness can also be an externally imposed temporal regime with mixed outcomes. Amidst a growing concern about the tidal wave of asylum seekers and economic migrants arriving in Europe, recent studies have demonstrated how state bureaucracies usurp the time of African migrants at the borders of Fortress Europe (Andersson, 2014), lock asylum seekers in prolonged "waiting" (Rotter, 2016) or "sticky", "suspended", "frenzied" and "ruptured" times (Griffiths, 2014; see Ramsay, 2017), and refugees in "transit" and "unstable" lives (El-Shaarawi, 2015). In general, however, present-ness has been associated with discussions of precarity, broadly defined as a material and symbolic condition of vulnerability relative to uncertainty and insecurity. Numerous works posit that economic, social and political conditions restrict the ability of precarious workers to conceive of time beyond the everyday (Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 2016; Fieulaine and Apostolidis, 2015). These conditions deprive them of "a minimally secured present" (Carvounas and Ireland, 2008: 173), which gives rise to an attitude that favours extended present-ness.

This temporality prevails in post-Fordist settings shaped by economic crisis, austerity and labour casualization (see Allison, 2013 for Japan). In France, Mathias Millet and Daniel Thin (2010) note that casual labour, income instability and social insecurity reduce the ability of precarious families to plan ahead constructively, as they are hampered by the needs of the present. As a result, these families develop a fatalistic sense of ineluctability, disinterest in world matters, detachment from the world of waged labour, and a tendency towards hedonism. Other works claim that neoliberal policies are changing – if not destroying – the structuring of daily life activities around blocks of labour and leisure time, a legacy of the industrial era (Bessin, 1999). This is a central argument in Guy Standing's (2011, 2013) work on the "precariat," a new "dangerous class" of "denizens" who lack stability and security in a world informed by precarity, neoliberalism and austerity. The precariat live on "tertiary time," a temporal regime that compels them to live permanently on standby, to labour excessively, to "work-for-labour" to secure casual jobs, and to give away their time to capricious employers. This has led to frustration and political action. A more passive form of political behaviour is observed in Greece. Aegean farmers assiduously play cards and dice in coffee shops, thereby reaffirming their masculinity and privileging "commitment to the 'present' that is combined with a disregard for the future" (Papataxiarchis, 1999: 158). Compulsive gambling also allows them to defy the state, as they

gamble with money borrowed from the Agricultural Bank which, in their opinion, is a subsidy that they are entitled to because of the state's moral obligations to support peasants. From this perspective, they are justified in not repaying these loans. For these farmers, timelessness is a source of autonomy and joy, "an active, not passive, response to conditions of marginalization and social exclusion," if not "a powerful political tool of resistance and opposition to surrounding neighbours and institutions" (Day et al., 1999: 7, 3).

The emphasis on today also exists in transitional countries shifting from traditional subsistence farming to diversified chain production. Bourdieu (1979: 65, 4) shows that the Algerian sub-proletarian in Oran from the 1960s was trapped in a hand-to-mouth existence and "kept absolutely incapable of calculating and forecasting by an economic system which demands forecasts, calculation," which are "alien ways, to be laboriously acquired" by "the man of pre-capitalist societies." The acquisition of rational dispositions requires a hold on the present and "a creative reinvention which is the very opposite of a purely mechanical and passive forced accommodation" (Bourdieu, 1979: 4). This temporal dissonance is also relevant in Edward P. Thompson's (1967) work on time and industrial capitalism in Europe, the advent of which required a lengthy and uneven process to shift from task-orientation to labour time, to impose clock time as the new standard, to demarcate "work" and "life" time, and to ensure a "severe restructuring of working habits – new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature" (Thompson, 1967: 57). This process is noticeable in contemporary transitional countries like Brazil where Kathleen Millar (2014) shows that poor *catadores* working in Rio's main dump prefer the precarious, low-paying and ungrateful work of garbage collection over more stable, profitable and valued waged labour, the former being a "refuge" that provides "relational autonomy," or flexible time allocated to care obligations and social relationships, in a setting, the dump, deprived of a future.

This transitional framework applies to Vietnam too. In 1986, this country adopted "Renovation" (*Đổi mới*) policies that facilitated the shift from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy based on the decollectivisation of agriculture, trade liberalization, the inflow of foreign capital and integration into global chains of production. These changes have decreased the share of employment in the agricultural sector and brought rapid industrialization, development and prosperity. The advent of the market economy has also profoundly modified the temporalities that govern economic, social and political life. In particular, the introduction of capitalist time has entailed the restructuring of production

to maximise efficiency and profit, imposed new time usages and labour incentives, promoted the division between labour and leisure time, and fostered an ideology of planning. The linear and cumulative time of capitalism substantiates a "forward movement, a kind of accumulation of 'progress' that builds up toward 'development'" (Harms, 2011: 103), a process enmeshed in time and which takes time. The market economy has also forced the state to formulate a new model for harmony and prosperity, a "civilised and equitable society" (Beresford, 2008: 226) comprising "happy" and "cultural" families (Leshkowich, 2008: 13). While the autarkic state of the socialist era alone determined aspirations, the capitalist state of the post-Renovation era must share its normative power with market and global forces. The relentless pursuit of cash, leisure and consumption fuels social stratification, a change that redefines priorities and desires at individual and societal levels. Education is central for this purpose for the emerging middle classes. Catherine Earl (2014) shows how humble rural families invest in the education of their daughters, their migration to Ho Chi Minh City and their careers in foreign companies to improve their livelihoods and acquire enduring class dispositions. The entrepreneurial elite colonizes the future through education as well, and by establishing strategic business relations with state entrepreneurs at opulent banquets in entertainment venues (Harms, 2013b; Hoang, 2015), a practice that Nguyễn-võ Thu Hương (2008) has referred to as "hooking economy." These new lifestyles, consumption and leisure practices serve as inspirational models for the less privileged classes.

However, some groups are unable to secure education and good jobs, and approach the future in progressive terms or keep up with the pace of acceleration that characterizes late modern societies. Their deceleration leads to the "desynchronization of different groups and segments of society," which in turn aggravates "the problem of 'ghettoization,' transforming society into a mosaic of temporal ghettos" (Rosa, 2003: 22). In his study about evictions in the "new urban zone" of Thủ Thiêm in Ho Chi Minh City, which is slated to become a financial hub, Erik Harms (2013a) describes one of these temporal ghettos. Public and private real estate developers approach development from the linear and productive temporality of datelines and timeframes, and use uncertainty and waiting to force residents to leave. This enforced present-ness alienates some residents who eventually give up and move. However, it empowers others with capital who manage to turn waiting into a productive activity, and therefore into political resistance against their oppressors. Desynchronization is also visible at the edges of Ho Chi Minh City. The people living in these areas do not choose between the spatiotemporal categories of "cyclical, non-clock-oriented 'peasant' mode of production" and

"urban time orientations more generally oriented toward the clock, linear progression, and a temporal stance that favors the accumulation of capital," but instead oscillate between them in their daily quest for balance between casual labour and social reproduction (Harms, 2011: 123).

The street sex workers operating in Châu Đốc are also desynchronized from the prevalent rhythms of capitalist development. They are local or migrant unskilled women who commute for labour purposes between the countryside and provincial cities, alternatively Ho Chi Minh City. In a country where human mobility is still restricted through the "household registration" (*hộ khẩu*) system, which under certain conditions grants access to the "card of the poor" (*thẻ hộ nghèo*) and public services, those who do not register their residential changes are unable to claim social protection. The sex workers I met in Châu Đốc wandered from one district to another over varying periods of time, sometimes with their families, without declaring their temporary residence to the people's committees. In doing so, they became administrative ghosts, unaccounted for in the census and poverty statistics. In the course of their "fluctuating sexual careers" that often began around the age of 15 and ended in their thirties (Lainez, 2015), they took different positions on the "continuum of economic-sexual exchange" (Tabet, 2004), shifting from sex-for-cash arrangements to mistress-type relationships to marriage depending on the opportunities and associated benefits, and combining sex work with other labour activities. Most rented cheap housing on a weekly basis in shantytowns and lived fleeting existences structured around frantic presents and speculative futures, in particular during the periods in which they worked as street sex workers.

The data for this article were collected during an ethnographic study conducted between June 2008 and August 2009 in Châu Đốc, with follow-ups in 2011 and 2015. Châu Đốc is a district located 240 km from Ho Chi Minh City in An Giang province, bordering Cambodia, in the Mekong Delta. During the 2000s, this province and particularly the district of Châu Đốc were sending and transit areas for the migration of sex workers to Cambodia. However, Cambodia ceased to be viewed as an Eldorado in the late 2000s. Instead, some women migrated to Ho Chi Minh City while others worked in Châu Đốc catering to local clients and tourists. In 2008, I embedded myself in a small group of street sex workers. By participating in their daily activities for more than a year, I gained access to their intimate lives, in particular their daily dealings with their families, patrons and moneylenders. The sample in the study consists of eight sex workers, two masseuses, a client recruiter; 17 families including five with at least one daughter working as a sex worker, 16 dressmaker apprentices working at the

workshop of the mass organization Women's Union, three moneylenders, three social workers, and two representatives of the local government. I use Tiên as a representative of her colleagues, who all had disadvantaged backgrounds, heavy familial responsibilities, an addiction to gambling, and a tendency to live on credit (Lainez 2015). The following sections examine in detail this lifestyle and the accompanying temporal mindset in relation to labour, care, gambling and indebtedness, and situate them in their respective contexts that shapes present-ness in specific ways.

Working and caring: Prioritizing relational autonomy

Labour and care are central aspects in the lives of street sex workers from Châu Đốc. These women approached them as tasks, which are "more humanly comprehensible than timed labour" and create the "least demarcation between 'work' and 'life'" (Thompson, 1967: 60). They performed these tasks in response to the needs and moods of the moment, without a sense of clock time. Task-orientation anchored them in a diffuse present that was primarily apprehended through the lens of "relational autonomy," which enabled them to nurture relationships and fulfill their oblibations. Relational autonomy first consisted in working as they wished, meaning without time constrains. By soliciting clients in public areas, they operated in the most marginal sector of the sex industry. In Vietnam, this trade has mushroomed with the expansion of the market economy and the demand of a new class of entrepreneurs (Nguyen, 2008). Since the 1990s, it has developed to serve a growing and heterogeneous demand that now includes all social groups. This demand is primarily fulfilled by young women originating from the province, although many women are now raised in big urban epicentres like Ho Chi Minh City.[2] The government prohibits "prostitution" (*mại dâm*), considered a "social evil" (*tệ nạn xã hội*), and thus bans brothels. However, it tolerates indirect forms of prostitution that take place discreetly in hotels, hairdressing salons, coffee shops, massage parlours, beer gardens, discotheques, bars, karaoke outlets and in public areas (Lainez 2015; Walters, 2003 on parks). This is a highly precarious, competitive and informal sector in which sex workers operate in contingent niches, some on a freelance basis and others as employees without contracts or benefits. They work under the constant threat of unwanted pregnancies and violence, sexually infectious diseases, stigma, and arrest and extortion by the police, and until 2013, of being sent to centres for re-education (Nguyen, 2008). Despite these drawbacks, many low- and unskilled women are attracted to sex work as it offers them autonomy, high-income prospects, instant cash-in-hand payments, free time and the flexibility of

combining it with other activities. These advantages act as a pull factor to ensure an abundant supply of sex workers in urban and rural settings.

In Châu Đốc, for instance, Tiên had no qualifications but earned US$50 per month working part-time as a sex worker, a wage equivalent to that of an agricultural worker or a waitress working full-time and under restrictive conditions. Previously, she had worked in other provinces of Southern Vietnam, and in Cambodia. Her schedule was flexible: she waited for clients during peak hours – early in the morning, late afternoon and at night – by working without the supervision of a pimp. Occasionally, she made discreet sexual advances to the men she sold lottery tickets to and "robbed them of their wallets" (*móc túi*). She worked several hours a day – sometimes up to ten – but never thought to calculate the workload or the hourly income. Her adaptive schedule depended on volatile demand, the intensity of police repression (severe at certain periods of the year such as during the annual celebration of the Goddess of the Realm in Núi Sam),[3] and on her health, as she had to stop working after three pregnancies (two of which led to abortions, one of which to the sale of her new-born child). Similar to the *catadores* from Rio (Millar, 2013), Tiên and her colleagues ignored these hazards and prioritized street sex work over wage labour in the local tourist and aquaculture industries that provide stable yet casual, time-constrained and low-paid jobs for unskilled workers. They also rejected livelihood programmes aimed at offering skills and alternative ways of generating income proposed by the Women's Union, a governmental mass organization and grassroots movement. They perceive knitting and sewing courses as a costly investment that conflicted with their daily needs, disrupted their flexible timetable and required planning of an objectified future that they struggle to conceive of. This resistance should not be read as a rejection of wage labour and its valued norms, as stressed by Christophe Serra-Mallol (2014) in relation to Tahitian homeless sex workers exhibiting the same behaviour, but as a way to exert agency in a constraining environment, and to resist structural, bureaucratic and temporal power infused in the worlds of wage labour and public assistance.

This rejection also stems from the fact that sex work and ancillary activities allowed the women to allocate time for care and social relationships, which is difficult to "conform to models that control labor time" (Tronto, 2003: 122). This is the second aspect of relational autonomy. Family solidarity is crucial for sustaining development in Vietnam. By making the family the central unit of production since the Renovation, the government has been actively promoting a familistic welfare regime in which households and communities assume responsibility for social reproduction rather than leaving it to the state and the market (Lainez 2015; Bélanger and

Barbieri, 2008; Leshkowich, 2008), in a context where the labour market is failing to provide secure and stable jobs (Arnold, 2012). In this system of "informal security" (Wood and Gough, 2006: 1699), kin relations become a vital and strategic resource for vulnerable families. It falls upon the offspring to finance familial consumption, a pattern that applies to the majority of sex workers in Vietnam, regardless of their age and economic situation (Lainez 2012, 2015, 2018; Government of Vietnam, 2012; Rubenson et al., 2005). For migrant sex workers who leave their families in rural areas and move to cities, the provision of care comprises remittances and home visits. However, for those who continue to live with their families, care includes the provision of material, affective and domestic support at home, in situations that can lead to conflicts with the mothers (Lainez 2012). This was the case of Tiên and her friends who allocated time to their dependent parents. In between working hours, Tiên cleaned, cooked and provided affective care to her mother, took her around town and kept her company. Some of her colleagues also had to take care of their own children and aged relatives. This gendered time for "maintenance and nurturance" (Tronto, 2003: 123) anchored them in a burdensome present, which was structured around repetitive tasks. While working and caring, Tiên and her friends also devoted time to relationships that mattered to them: they "had fun" (*chơi*) chatting and joking with each other, dealt with bookies and moneylenders, and cultivated business contacts in cafés and parks, in a culture where "hanging out" facilitates economic activity based on social bonding (Harms, 2013a: 361).

Not only did relational autonomy reinforce their commitment to a frantic present, but it also shaped their future, which was limited by structural possibilities and the burden of care. On the one hand, street sex work rarely lent itself to savings, career prospects and long-term planning for the majority of women living from hand to mouth in small towns like Châu Đốc. Nonetheless, some sex workers managed to overcome these limitations through persistence: they managed to settle in Ho Chi Minh City and to build a pragmatic future based on entrepreneurial sex work and, in some cases, circular migration to wealthy countries like Singapore (Lainez 2011, 2017). For the ones that remained in the provinces though, the income earned was spent almost immediately. On the other hand, providing care was a burden in itself because of the weight of the material support required and the multiple tasks conducted on a daily basis (Lainez 2012). Care also hampered their future for it requires a "social presence," meaning the "availability that is necessary to anticipate, intervene in situations, at the right moment, in a pragmatic, adapted and contextualised way" (Bessin and Gaudart, 2009: §16), or what Elizabeth Reid Boyd (2002) refers to as

"being there," a temporality that transcends the present. These features limited the sex workers' autonomy because care demanded adaptability, flexibility and considerable time, energy and resources on an everyday basis, and constrained their desire to distance themselves from their parents through long-term migration.

In the end, the women could not project themselves in a foreseeable future posited by calculation. Instead, they approached it in a utopian manner like the Algerian sub-proletarians in the 1960s who could only contemplate a "dreamed future" (*future rêvé*) through miracles, knowing that "magical hope is the outlook on the future characteristic of those who have no real future before them" (Bourdieu, 1979: 69). For the sex workers, the miracle consisted in finding a "precious and generous man" (*quý nhân*), someone "very nice and rich who will help" (*người rất tốt, giàu có se giúp đỡ*). This Prince Charming, who embodied the solution to their problems, is akin to the "connection" (*piston*) who pulls the strings, mediates in unknown fields and secures jobs for the Algerians in Oran, "an impersonal and personalized force, omnipresent and localized, which moves and animates the whole social universe" (Bourdieu, 1962: 215). In Châu Đốc, this saviour was epitomized by local and foreign tourists visiting the city, and by prospective husbands from Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea proposed by commercial matchmakers (see Bélanger et al., 2011).[4] The rare cases of transnational marriage feed these sex workers' hopes of extending kinship and care networks, ensuring a stable source of income and care, quitting the sex trade and having a better life abroad. Some women showed a more pragmatic mindset as well. While waiting for "the saviour", they established relations with lovers and boyfriends who were temporarily integrated into their families and became a source of material and affective support (Lainez 2012). This was the case of a young motorcycle repairman Tiên met in Kiên Giang province, her new "husband" (*chồng*) as she referred to him, and who moved to Châu Đốc to live with her and her mother. Relationships like this only lasted a few weeks and were based on a mix of sentiment and venality. Beyond this horizon, the women could only rely on hope and the belief in miracles. This approach to the future illuminates their passion for gambling.

Hitting the jackpot: Succumbing to the eternal present of gambling

Gambling also strongly shapes time management in the lives of street sex workers. It acts like a centripetal force that distorts and shrinks the past and the future towards a saturated and speculative present. Despite

disapprobation from the state and being labelled as a "social evil," "gambling" (*cờ bạc*) enjoys great popularity in Vietnam, in particular among the most disadvantaged groups including sex workers.[5] The newspaper of An Giang province (*Báo An Giang*) frequently decries the "ravages" (*tàn phá*) of gambling, particularly of illegal lotteries, cock fighting and football championships and sporting events, and the proliferation of disreputable casinos along the Cambodian border including in Châu Đốc. The state-approved "lottery" (*xổ số*) is excluded from this list though. In every province, a state-run company prints and distributes tickets through retailers, consisting mainly of children, disabled and elderly people, petty traders and casual workers including street sex workers. The illegal lottery (*số đề*, or "written number") is as popular, if not more, than the legal one. The gamblers bet through bookies on the last two, three or four digits of the winning numbers of the legal lottery. *Số đề* offers them a higher probability of winning, up to 70 times the amount placed on the bet. At the same time, they circumvent the limitations of the legal lottery, as they are not restricted to the numbers printed on official tickets or to those proposed by the retailers. Moreover, as there is a belief that the official lottery companies distribute the prizes unfairly, they believe that they are improving their chances of winning (Truitt, 2013: 133).

From a temporal perspective, gambling contracts the past and the future towards an eternal present. Gerda Reith (1999: 136) notes that the "field of gamblers' attention is defined by the unfolding of the event on which they have their stake," or when "the uncertain becomes known; the future becomes the present." The sex workers were compulsively addicted to this eternal present veiled in the "narcotic effect" of gambling (Benjamin, 1992) and sought to revive it with each new card, roulette game, lottery ticket bought and *số đề* bet taken. The excitement was at its height when the roulette balls came out of the basket and when they gathered to listen to the radio broadcast of the winning lottery numbers to check their tickets and *số đề* bets. Nothing could disrupt these moments combining suspense and exhilaration, which inevitably led to disappointment and rarely exaltation.

This instant also structured the women's schedules. As illustrated by Tiên's vignette in the introduction, they purchased lottery tickets in the morning and in the evening for business purposes and personal consumption, and played cards and roulette with their peers, relatives and neighbours after the midday nap. At 4 p.m., they discussed the results and, in some cases, made records for statistical purposes. From 5 p.m. onwards, they received the door-to-door *số đề* bookies who recorded the bets for the next day, and occasionally paid out the winnings. This schedule applied to every day of the week. Gambling also organized the women's lives through

beliefs and rituals as shown by the quest for auspicious numbers, as nothing "happens 'by chance', and players see meaning in everything" (Reith, 1999: 158). Women who had endured a long spell of bad luck put their fate in the hands of dreams, fortune-tellers, supernatural forces, young children and madmen from whom they requested numbers. They also interpreted premonitory signs through a chart that associates 80 numbers with 36 animals and four deities. For instance, the numbers 2, 42 and 82 represent the snail, 6, 46 and 86 the tiger, 40 and 80 the "Kitchen God" (*ông táo*), and so on (see the full table in Durrwell, 1901). Many sex workers were constantly inspecting their environment to discern signs, all of which required vigilance and alertness. They also used other interpretative systems. Occasionally, they slept on family graves to plead for the grace of their ancestors' souls through dreams, including those wandering souls who had had "bad deaths" (*người chết oan*). In the morning, they interpreted their dreams using the chart. In brief, the eternal present of gambling acted as a pivotal moment around which rituals and sociality were organized to ensure its repetition.

While these repetitions made one day of play indistinguishable from another, they also epitomized a rebirth. As Gerda Reith (1999: 137) points out, the "past can never 'actualise' itself in gambling, for it requires the operation of memory to do so, and the abolition of time in gambling means the abolition of memory too." Memory is thus erased and past experiences fail to inform present and future decisions. With each new day of play, compulsive gamblers like Tiên forgot about past losses, the debt piling up with *số đề* bookies and moneylenders, and their inability to correctly interpret premonitory signs, to determine winning auspicious numbers and to produce useful statistics. The past was past, and they could only hope that the new round would bring success. By waging over and over, they invoked hypothetical winnings. Hope is an optimistic attitude based on an expectation of positive outcomes. While they knew that there is a low probability of winning when gambling particularly on the lottery, the hope of earning a few thousand *đồng* on cards and roulette, a few tens on *số đề*, or a few hundreds of thousand or million in the lottery reflected their expectation of a positive outcome from gambling. While this activity was a major source of expenditure that wrecked their budget, it also projected them towards a future free of financial constraints. Gambling represented not only an easy way of solving financial problems, but also the promise of a "buried treasure" (Martignoni, 1997: 51) they could unearth by solving mathematical enigmas and deciphering premonitory signs. It was thus worth investing in as it would eventually turn losses into earnings and poverty into wealth. Sociologists of gambling stress

that gamblers tend not to perceive gambling money as being lost, but as an investment that will yield fruit (Martignoni, 1997: 52). When asked why she kept gambling despite the risk of losing her hard-earned income, Tiên emphasized the positive outcomes: the happiness that a particular number brought to her life, the pressing debts she repaid, and the beautiful clothes she purchased. By investing in gambling, she and her friends gained some sense of control over their lives and projected themselves into a promising yet improbable future. Gambling located them in a "dedicated and protected world that offers cohesion and complicity" (Martignoni, 1997: 55), an "escape from time" (Reith, 1999: 138). This socially rich and playful world allowed them to put aside past problems and renew the hope of "hitting the jackpot" (*nhấn jackpot*). Yet it also imprisoned them in a limiting present that organized their daily lives around recurrent losses, and impaired their ability to conceive of past and future horizons beyond the distorting lens of gambling time. It also exacerbated their debts.

Living in debt: Negotiating the temporality of debt-juggling

Prioritizing relational autonomy, care and gambling comes with a cost: it leads to a life in debt orientated towards the present. This form of enforced present-ness sets preconditions for the future by binding it to past decisions. Taking on debts to solve immediate concerns leads to a schedule of repayment that will constrain both the present and the future. After the launch of the Renovation reforms, the Vietnamese government opened the credit markets to fund economic development. During the 1990s, cheap formal credit proliferated across Vietnam, but was inaccessible to the most vulnerable segments of the population. The sex workers and their families earned enough income to meet their needs and were not poor according to the poverty line of US$12.70 per person per month that applied in rural areas between 2005 and 2010. But they were financially vulnerable. The notion of vulnerability pays attention to economic variations rather than fixed attributes, as in the case of poverty, and sheds light on the consequences of a risk or hazard (Sirven, 2007: 17). In Châu Đốc, such consequences include the forced relocation of unregistered households living in shanties to the outskirts of the city, the hardship that accompanies accidents and chronic and mismanaged illnesses, flood devastation during the rainy season, fines imposed for prostitution, and hush money for police rackets and gambling. The challenge for the sex workers was to cope with daily needs, irregular cash flow, rising living costs and rampant inflation. Public credit was available under restricted

conditions and for specific purposes to holders of the card of the poor. However, the majority of the sex workers were financially excluded from formal credit institutions due to a lack of collateral and legal documents. This was the case of Tiên who had long lost her ID card and whose mother did not have a household certificate or card of the poor. Consequently, she turned to informal credit sources like many other disadvantaged populations in Vietnam (Lainez, 2014). Women like Tiên first approached relatives and friends who provided flexible and instant credit, often at no cost. When this source of credit was unavailable, they turned to moneylenders who provided "hot loans" (*tiền nóng*) at high interest rates (see Truitt, 2007). As a result, most sex workers – and their families – were permanently indebted and trapped in pressing financial temporalities.

Time is a crucial feature of debt, as borrowing ties the debtor to specific timescales or "calendrics of repayment" (Guyer, 2012: 497). The repayment schedules for loans taken within the inner circle of relatives and friends were the most favourable because interest was rarely applied and the repayment period was often not stipulated. This time was non-binding, fluid and costless. Yet these loans were not always available because of the limited financial capacity of vulnerable households. Hence the sex workers often approached moneylenders who imposed strict calendrics. The most popular product was "collected money" (*tiền góp*), a loan that allowed a daily repayment of the principal and interest during an agreed period, usually 24 days. The rate varied between 10 and 30%, the standard being 20% for a 24-day cycle, or 25% per month. For a loan of US$6.35, the sex workers paid US$0.32 daily, or US$7.63 over 24 days at 20%. They rarely calculated the annual rate of 300%, as they generally intended to repay their loan soon after securing it, a scenario that often did not come to pass. When the women were denied collected loans, or when they needed cash for an urgent matter and believed that they could repay it shortly, they borrowed "standing money" (*tiền đứng*), a short-term loan that had to be repaid within a few days, which included the daily repayment of interest until the principal was recovered. For a loan of US$6.35 the interest was US$0.20–0.32. The calculation of the compounded monthly (90–150%) and annual rate (1080–1800%) was again superfluous. Other temporal rules applied, for instance debtors are expected to settle their debts before the Vietnamese New Year (*Tết*) so that the creditors can ward off bad luck, spend their money during the celebration and invest it in new credit transactions. In brief, time was binding, structured and costly for collected and standing loans. In addition, the moneylenders who sold these products controlled the time of their clients because they visited them every

day in the late afternoon to collect their dues. Collected and standing loans were risky products because an initial loan of a few hundred thousand *đồng* could spiral into a debt of several million within weeks. This escalation threw many sex workers and their families into a vicious spiral, forcing them to borrow elsewhere, and under the same conditions, only to repay the interest rates of the original loans, thus fragmenting the overall debt. They ended up "juggling" (Guerin, 2014) loans and interest rates, deadlines and calendrics, lenders and social relationships, sometimes "taking from here to pay there" (*lấy của bên này để trả bên kia*) and alternating between the positions of debtor and creditor. This was the case of Tiên and her mother who constantly juggled personal and familial debts with moneylenders.

Debt-juggling reinforces present-ness and further complicates the temporality of debt. First, sex workers had to juggle with various calendrics simultaneously and spend a lot of their time dealing with their providers. Second, debt was a central topic of discussion in their community. They often discussed aggressive moneylenders, the situation that led to an over-indebted friend to "flee the debt" (*trốn nợ*, see Ma, 2008) – a desperate solution that Tiên and her mother had opted for due to their inability to repay loans – and spread false rumours about runaway borrowers to mislead the moneylenders who were looking for them. Third, juggling generated stress when their daily income was insufficient to cover the daily repayments, a scenario that led to delays, interest growth, debt fragmentation and over-indebtedness. The stress was aggravated when the moneylenders relied on harassment, threats and asset seizure to compel their delinquent clients to pay. Thus debt-juggling pervaded the thoughts of the sex workers and anchored them to a quantified and monetized present.

Collected and standing loans also shaped the future of the women. In general terms, "credit is a method of lending concrete resources to an institution or an individual in the present and demanding (or hoping for) a return in the future" (Peebles, 2010: 227). This comes at the cost of a "promise to repay in a more or less distant and unpredictable future" that can be guaranteed by pawning "something to the creditor by means of the contract in case he does not pay, something that he still 'possesses' and controls, for example, his body" (Lazzarato, 2012: 45, 41). Collected and standing loans obliged sex workers to wager on the future. They sustained their and their families' lives on credit by mortgaging their labour. However, this mortgage was speculative due to the uncertainty that permeated their lives, as they were constantly at risk of losing their clients due to the volatility of the sex market, of being arrested, extorted and sent to re-education centres, of becoming pregnant, of being exposed to sexually

transmitted diseases, and of being asked by their parents to act as a loan guarantor or to pay for new loans over which they had no control – all scenarios that happened to Tiên's group. In order to keep their promise to repay loans, Tiên and her colleagues had to generate sufficient funds by selling sexual services and lottery tickets, all while hoping that they would not face further setbacks. The volatile nature of their income meant that they struggled with "steadiness" and "punctuality" in repaying their debts, two qualities required to "avoid (potentially violent) sanctions by satisfying the demands of repayment on time" (Adkins, 2017: 452). Hence the moneylenders had to show flexibility in their demands for repayment, adjusting the calendrics in response to the specifics of each woman's situation.

Nevertheless, flexibility rendered the future of the women even more speculative. This feature is characteristic of informal (Lelart, 2006) and increasingly of formal finance. Lisa Adkins (2017: 455) stresses that the calendrics of securitized debt in the Western world are increasingly flexible, as they may "be sped up, slowed down, suspended, delayed, rescheduled, reset, restarted, reassembled, reorganized and even reversed." The adjustable calculation of debt loading prioritizes the payment of interest rather than the repayment of principal. This applies to our case study. The sex workers regularly delayed repayments and renegotiated rates and schedules with lenders who were more interested in adding interest than in settling debts. In general, negotiations did not follow strict rules and depended on idiosyncrasies as well as on the solvency and current situation of the borrower, a reason why moneylenders constantly kept an eye on them. In the end, two temporalities of debt coalesced: the contractual time of the calendrics of repayment governed by the linearity and rationality of the interest rate, and the practical one of the "speculative calendrics of payment" informed by individualization and flexibility, which "binds the subject not to the extensive time of the calendar but to the indeterminate movements of the time of speculation" (Adkins, 2017: 458). This left lenders and sex workers no option but to bet on the future. The former imposed strict calendrics and charged high rates to the latter, fully aware of the risks of delay and default derived from their precarious lives. The latter kept borrowing and betting on their future with the knowledge that they could possibly renegotiate the terms and calendrics, or at the very worst, break the debt. This was their only leverage in a time-constrained financial system that disempowered and locked them in a stressful and saturated present structured around meetings and negotiations, and a conjectural future limited by the horizon of interest and loan repayment. Ultimately, they remained in a holding pattern of calendrics and transactions that served to pay for the past rather than the future. Collected and standing loans

enabled the women to keep their heads above water in a context of familism and limited welfare, but not to move forward in their aspirations.

Conclusions

The street sex workers from Châu Đốc may be described as living active if not overactive lives, as illustrated by the multiple tasks and activities they undertake in a single day. Nevertheless, instead of moving forward on the path of progress and development, like their peers who manage to join the middle classes by investing in education, migrating to Ho Chi Minh City and working in foreign firms (Earl, 2014), they kept busy without constructing a clear life plan, migrated without changing their marginal status, cared for their relatives without being discharged of their obligations, gambled fervently without hitting the jackpot and borrowed endlessly without repaying their loans. They were furiously treading water to keep from drowning in precarity. They expressed their agency and desires for advancement in a context of structural violence and temporal liminality, as shown by the fact that they juggled modern and cosmological imageries of time where combinations of luck, speculation and spiritual affects circulate. Yet this industry did not dramatically improve their livelihoods or propel them into the glittering future sold to them by the market economy and the state. This agentic and frenetic movement was located in a fluid, saturated and anxious present, and a utopian, conjectural and mortgaged future.

Extended present-ness appears to be a feature of subaltern populations. In post-Fordist countries, the lives of the precariat decelerate or break up as a result of the entrenchment of neoliberal policies, the disappearance of the welfare state, the impact of economic crises and austerity, and the trivialization of precarity. The precariat live in an open society that is regulated by "tertiary time," a regime that is guided by the search for and the holding on to of scarce, casual and low-paid jobs (Standing, 2011, 2013). It is increasingly de-synchronized with the main institutional and socioeconomic rhythms of mainstream society, denied access to temporal practices and institutions that are increasingly made available to privileged classes, and trapped in a temporal ghetto. This analysis does not apply to Vietnam, a transitional country that has recently embraced the global market economy after decades of war and orthodox socialism, and where a large part of the population still works in the informal economy (Arnold, 2012). Many of these workers come from rural backgrounds but are losing their attachment to agrarian livelihoods. Unlike the precariat, they do not see themselves as having lost the benefits acquired over decades of social struggle, but instead imagine themselves to be moving towards a glittering future that requires adaptation, if not transformation.

Many of these workers grew up in a rural society regulated by seasonal (wet and dry periods of the year) and agrarian cycles associated with rice cultivation and religious festivals and celebrations, and "natural" rhythms such as sunrise, mid-day sun and sunset that regulate activity and inactivity during the day. They do not try to preserve this temporality in the cities where they migrate and settle. Instead, they use agency and "creative reinvention" (Bourdieu, 1979: 4) – and some "luck" (*hên*) as the sex workers would say – to adjust to the new temporalities of urban and capitalist society, and to oscillate between various forms of time orientation to ensure production and social reproduction. This uneven process may be based on social and economic acceleration, but also necessarily generates de-synchronisation. While some succeed in acquiring a habitus to fit into the capitalist structure, others struggle to keep up with the high-speed pace of the capitalist steamroller. As a result, they are left behind and marooned in a slower time that pulls them towards intense presents rather than foreseeable futures. Hence capitalism simultaneously accelerates and decelerates, and creates clock and cumulative time without destroying cyclical and "natural" time, which is not "fundamentally incompatible with linear time" (Harms, 2011: 101). The coexistence of varied dynamics and temporal regimes in capitalist development processes compels people to act and "think through several temporal models at once" (Harms, 2011: 101), which they calibrate depending on their needs, location and aptitudes.

As a result, people who are having to negotiate diverse temporal regimes end up with frantic presents and speculative futures at certain times of their lives. This group of people encompasses sex workers, as this paper has shown, and possibly other workers living in precarious conditions. For example, numerous destitute female sewing apprentices I met at the workshop of the Women's Union who did not work as sex workers lived similar lifestyles structured around care, gambling and debt. While a hyper-intensified present may be a permanent feature in the lives of some women, it could be a temporary or transitory state for others who manage to escape the province, build a career and and/or find their Prince Charming. But even after having improved their life prospects, some continue to gamble fervently and borrow in the informal sector, notwithstanding their age, class and past experiences. It seems that some temporal habits and dispositions are not easily changed. In addition, they can be combined with other temporal modes at various life stages. I met some former sex workers who had married a client in Singapore and managed to dramatically change their lives, but were still playing *số đề* on credit through SMS with bookies based in Vietnam on a daily basis. Conversely, some street sex workers stuck in hyper-intensified presents

from Châu Đốc had worked in entertainment venues in Phnom Penh, meaning they had embraced clock time, and stable income and labour conditions as found in factory work.

These temporal adjustments do not convey political intention, at least for street sex workers in rural Vietnam. By rejecting wage labour and assistance programmes aimed at "saving" them from being unproductive, feckless and spendthrift dangers to society – a classic dismissive argument used in the "social evils" policy and discourse in Vietnam and critically reviewed by scholars of paid intimacy (Zelizer, 1994: 3) – they are not renouncing waged labour and public aid, but dispensing with the constraints of these options. Further, by preserving their relational autonomy and social reproduction, they adhere to familistic state prerogatives aimed at facilitating a smooth and rapid capitalist development. These choices are practical rather than political, and "convey detachment, not defiance or even refusal" (Millar, 2014: 49). Frantic present-ness may be a product of temporal desynchronization and ghettoization, but it may also create the conditions for enjoyment and reproduction.

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Notes

1. The name is a pseudonym.
2. Male prostitution exists, but it is rare and limited to certain sectors of the sex industry including upscale discotheques and night venues in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Like women, men also invoke economic reasons for having chosen this economic activity. However, their personal trajectories and care obligations differ from those of female sex workers due to their smaller investment in the family (Government of Vietnam, 2012).
3. Located in the outskirts of Châu Đốc, the temple of the 'Goddess of the Realm' (*Bà chúa xứ*) in Núi Sam attracts millions of visitors every year, especially during the festival in the fourth lunar month.
4. The transnational matchmaking business was as its peak in the 2008 and 2009.
5. I also observed this pattern in Cần Thơ and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and in the Vietnamese shanties in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In Đà Nẵng and Hanoi, Ngo et al. (2007) noticed these patterns as well in relation to sex workers. In Europe, other scholars observed this behaviour among the working classes (Amadieu, 2015; Martignoni, 1997).

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