

Kissing and Holding Hands:

Constructions of Male Same-Sex Attraction and Implications for HIV/AIDS Risk in Vietnam

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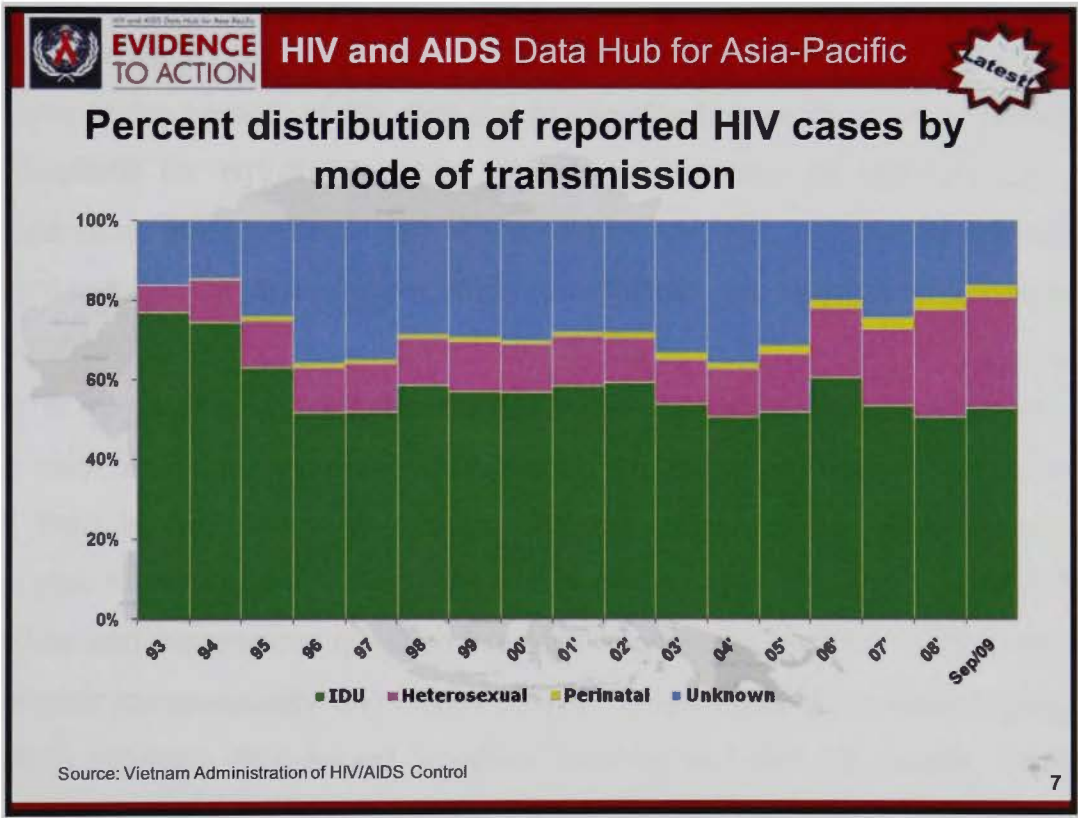
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Stopping the spread of HIV should be easy.

Dennis Altman 2006

Official Vietnamese HIV Infections by mode of transmission



Abstract

Employing an auto-ethnographic approach this thesis combines a number of different research traditions in the social sciences to consider what is gay sex and homosexuality in the Vietnamese context. Using auto-ethnographic narrative I tackle the sensitive and culturally imbedded subject matter via a personal journey presented as a memoir. The memoir is not about describing sex and labelling the other through the lenses of Western understandings of this phenomena; rather it is an attempt to address how these aspects of life play out in non-Western settings while considering the ramifications for HIV/AIDS public education programs. In Vietnam gay men, homosexual men, MSM or same sex attracted men are not included in any national surveillance testing. The state links research on MSM to, and constructs homosexuality as, transvestism.

There is a paucity of research on Same-Sex attracted men in Vietnam. This research may well be the only ethnographic research undertaken on same-sex attracted men in contemporary Vietnam and the ways and by what means they negotiate new found opportunities to explore and experience sex and sexuality. These opportunities and experiences question Western understandings and Western research on Vietnamese homosexuality and HIV/AIDS risk. This ethnographic study highlights a contradiction between desk-bound literature reviews and real life events. Therefore this research has the capacity to both expand and contest the current literature on sex between men in Vietnam.

Declaration

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

"I, Phillip John Dare, declare that the PhD thesis entitled Kissing and Holding Hands: Constructions of Male Same-Sex Attraction and Implications for HIV/AIDS Risk in Vietnam is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work".

Signature

Date.....20/3/17.....

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Acronyms

AIDS Acquired immune deficiency syndrome/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

ATM Automated teller machine

CSIRO Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

GRID Gay related immune deficiency

HIV Human immunodeficiency virus

HCMC Ho Chi Minh City

MSM Men who have sex with men

PSI Population Services International

UN United Nations

UNAIDS United Nations programme on AIDS

USAID United States Agency for International Development

WHO World Health Organisation

Acknowledgements

It is impossible to complete a PhD endeavour without acknowledging institutions and people who have assisted me on this journey. I am indeed grateful to Victoria University for accepting me and my project as being worthy of their support and I am indebted to them for providing the space and the resources that they have.

This journey really commenced when I returned to study in 2000. Dr. Heather Wallace initially accepted me into her Community Development degree as a mature age student and suggested I attend a CD conference in Vietnam. Since then Heather has encouraged, counselled, coaxed, inspired and has been an all-round support to me. For a short time this also included her being my supervisor, now she has become a friend; thank you Heather. Janis Webb and Professor Jim Sillitoe from VU's Student Learning Unit showed me I could overcome my learning disability and that it was possible to write better.

I wish to thank Dr. Julie Stephens who suggested I talk to Mark Stevenson. Like any relationship, the relationship with my principle supervisor has had its ups-and-downs. However, Dr Mark Stevenson has always shown great interest in my project and has encouraged me to be creative and to push the boundaries of academic respectability with this research. At times his encouragement has been a haven in times of self-doubt. Mark has extended my intellectual reach and assisted me to elevate my feelings of self worth. He too has become a friend and colleague. As an Asian Studies specialist Mark is an endangered species at Victoria University. Dr Christine Gillespie's coaching and encouragement with advice and expert editing has improved the quality and the readability of chapters titled *Approaching the Orient* and *From Beds to Desks: The Journey from Lovers to Memoir*. Dr Joanna Kujawa gave invaluable advice and copy editing assistance on early drafts of this thesis. I am grateful to all of these fine scholars for their skills, encouragement and humility.

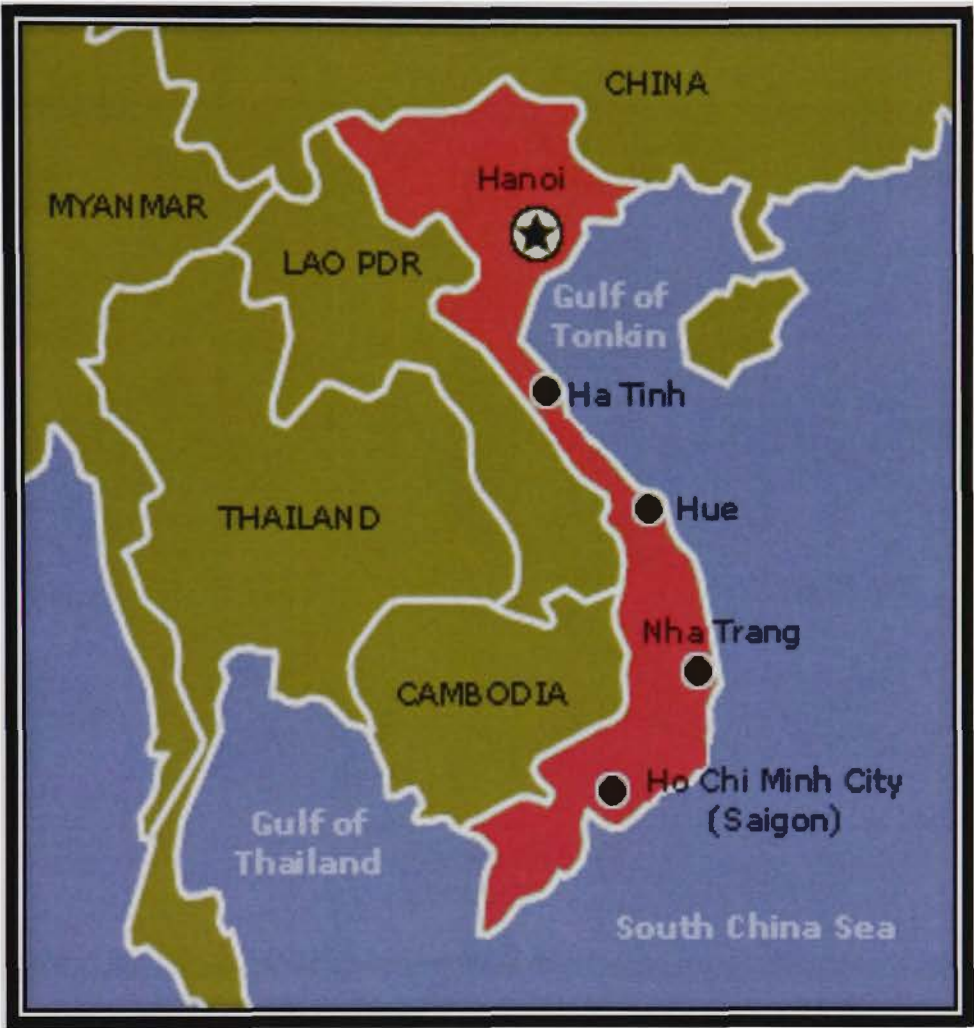
To my supporters, colleagues, fellow students and friends Annie, Anne, Caitlin, Elisabeth, Helen, Irene, Jen, Jess, Josipa, Joyce, Lyddia, Lisa, Richard, Robbie, Robert, Teah, Sue, Siew-Fang and Vicky it has been a fun, and at times, stressful journey and I am glad I have had you to be part of it; we have shared in each others' whining about the ineptitude and self-interest displayed by the same people year-in-year-out.

There are two very important people who I am also indebted to. Once commenced, I may not have completed this endeavour if not for Dr Ruth Ballardie and Professor Elaine Martin. Elaine Martin has always put research-students interests and needs before her own, much to her own professional detriment.

However, the most important people to thank are of course my Vietnamese friends who this research is for. This project would never have happened had I not meet these people. People who have become so significant and integral to my life I cannot imagine a life without them in it. My life has changed in so many ways since I first went to Vietnam. I am different person, a better person. These friends and their acceptance of me has changed me, forever.

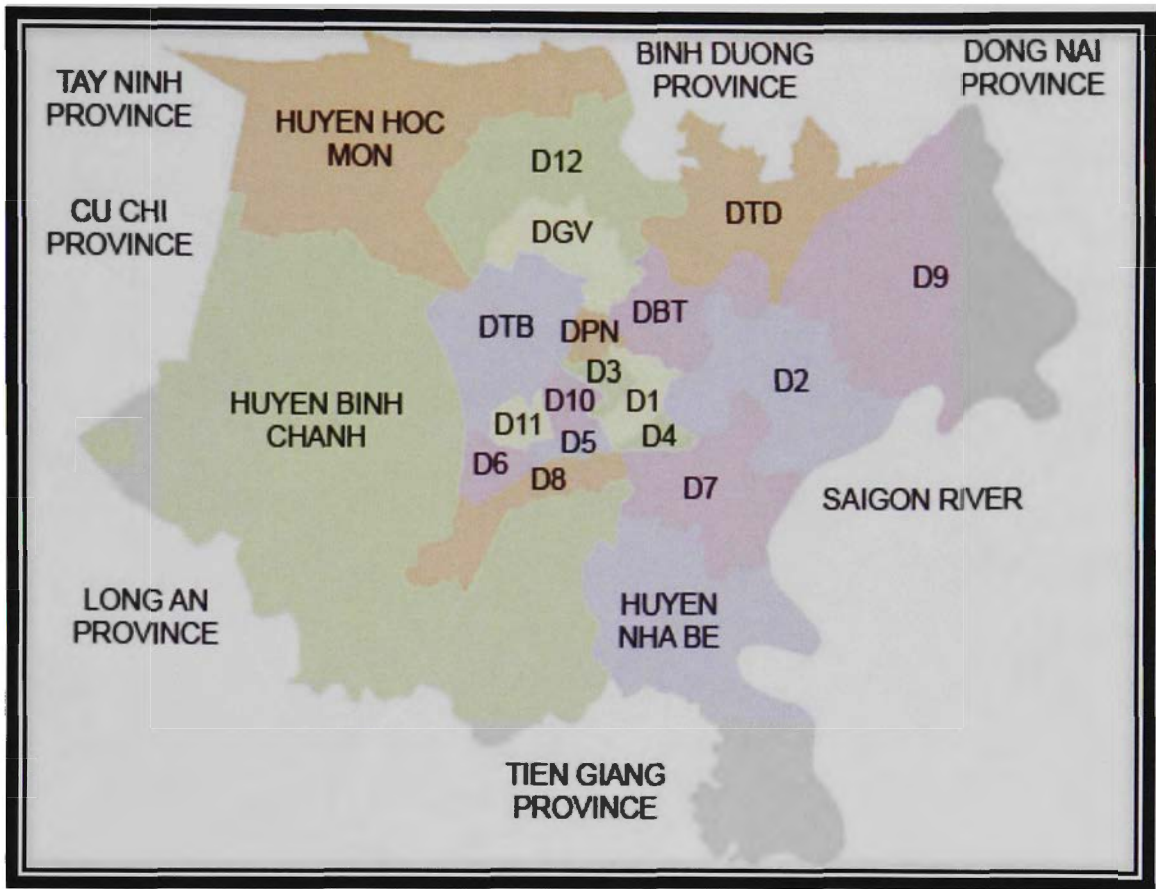
And of-course there is my mother who had to put up with me and my moods in her house. Thank you Mum for a life-time of love and support.

Map 1: Vietnam



Source: Google Maps

Map 2: Greater Ho Chi Minh City District Map

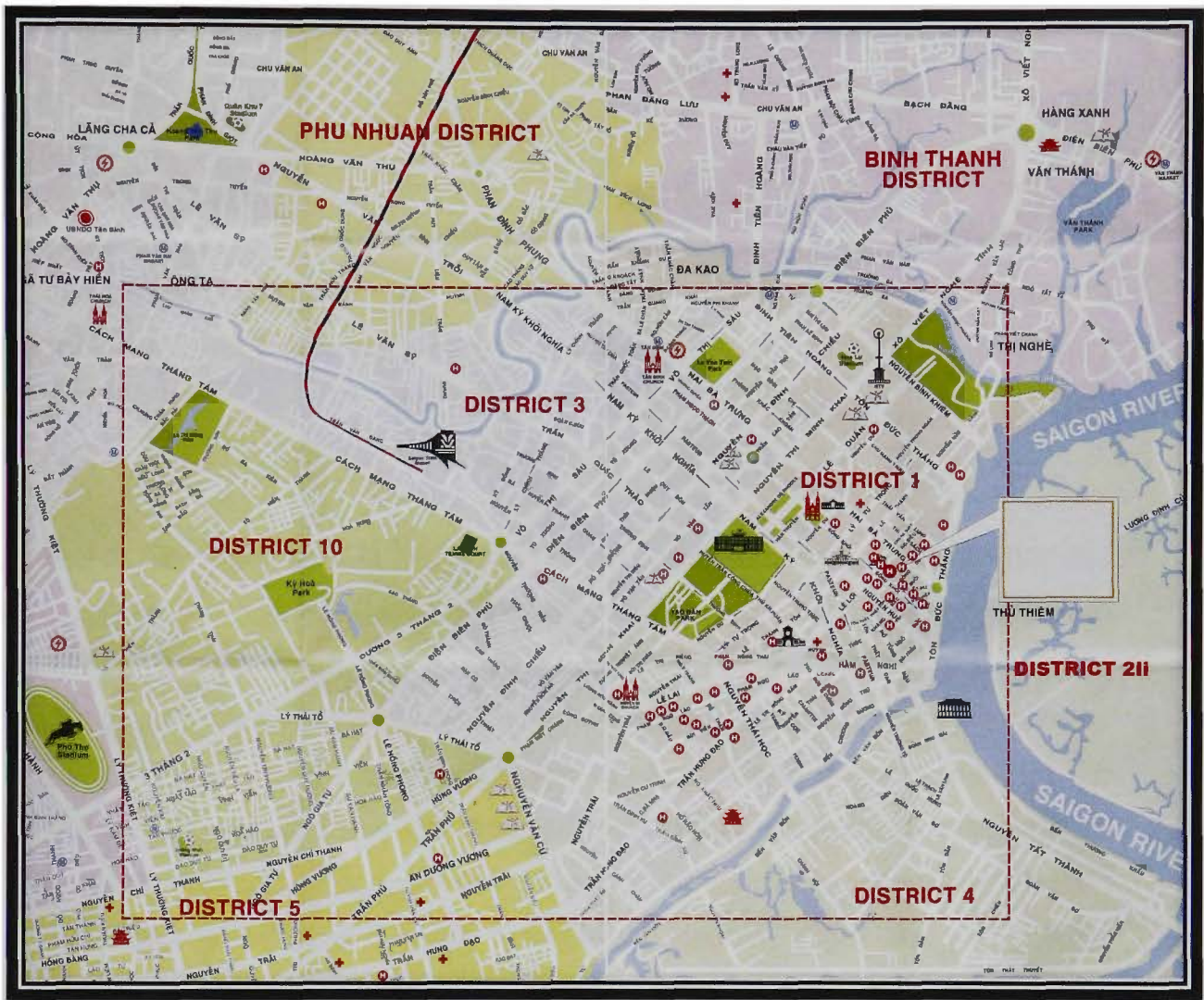


Source: Google Maps

Legend

- D 1-12: Districts 1-12
- DTB: Tan Binh District
- DTD: Thu Duc District
- DBT: Binh Thanh District
- DGV: Go Vap District
- DPN: Phu Nhuan District

Map 3: Greater Ho Chi Minh City Map



Source: Google Maps

Chapter 1

Introduction

... one of the most dangerous culprits in the proliferation of HIV/AIDS is the institutional power that exists through the process of labelling and fixing identity.

Roger Myrick 1996 p ix.

This thesis explores the cultural and linguistic context relating to the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission among same-sex attracted men in Vietnam. It originates from my lived experience of gay sex in Vietnam. A major component of the thesis is therefore an auto-ethnographic account of my sexual and non-sexual relationships with Vietnamese gay men. The questions the thesis asks and the approach it takes originate in the propensity for Vietnamese same-sex attracted men to engage in unsafe sex practices and my concerns for the implications this behaviour has for HIV infection. This thesis is phenomenologically driven in thinking through experiences of gay sex that diverge from what is officially given voice or even recognised by health and development workers or much contemporary research in the field. In this thesis I resist the urge to typologise behaviour, identity or language.

Background

Nobody really knows what the prevalence rate of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is for same-sex-attracted men in Vietnam. There have been only a limited number of studies undertaken to assess the risk to Vietnamese men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) of being infected with HIV/AIDS. Such studies have found that MSM in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) have: multiple sex partners, high levels of anal sex with low levels of condom use, and conflicting levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and its transmission paths. One study of 208 MSM found that 5.8% tested HIV positive (St. Pierre 1997; see also Cao, Luong and Truong undated; Wilson and Crawthorne 1999; Colby 2001). Reports and studies originating in countries neighbouring Vietnam

suggest that the small sample in the Vietnamese study most probably under represents what are in all likelihood higher infection rates¹. There is no officially sanctioned nationwide testing for HIV prevalence for Vietnamese MSM; the corollary being that there can be no official nationwide reporting of infection rates for this group of men either.

Traditional and Boring Vs Experimental and Exciting

At the commencement of this research it was envisaged that the production of this thesis would be from the analysis of data collected via “respectable” means, displaying professional distance between the researcher and that of his subjects. Such an approach aims at an objective assessment and analysis, leading to findings that would be devoid of any subject position/s, bias or, personal voice. I am in no doubt that the nature of the research meant such caution was called for, however, in reality, achieving total objectivity in social research is nigh on impossible (Ellis 2009). Researching sex and sexuality, per se, is fraught enough, but gay male sex and sexuality in particular, in an exotic location, required an added level of caution that would send any research ethics committee into meltdown if participant observation was stated as the principle research method. However, designing an appropriate approach that would meet research ethics committee approval limited me in what choices I had,² and this threatened to bore me, and what is worse, place my existing relationships in jeopardy of exploitation. Even though this project was my first major postgraduate research project, it needed to inspire me and protect my friends at the same time. I have only ever undertaken work that has interested and excited me, both in my professional or academic life (cf. Williams 1996) and I was not going to start with less than that with this research thesis. It was impossible for me to ‘separate scholarship and my personal quest’ (Lewin and Leap 1996 p. 9) and at the same time

¹ Chan 1998 in Colby 2001; UNAIDS/WHO Report Dec 2002 show infection rates in MSM in each of the following countries: 33% in the Philippines; 32% in Hong Kong; 29% Singapore; 16% in Japan; 15% in Indonesia; and 14% in Cambodia.

² See Ralph Bolton, Stephen Murray and Walter Williams for the vagaries of ethics committees as they all discuss the difficulty of designing research methodological approaches when dealing with university ethics committees when researching homosexuality and the erotic.

improve HIV/AIDS prevention and education in Vietnam: I found that had to include my lived experience.

While writing up key moments of my journey in this project it became increasingly obvious to me that my lived experience was an important component that needed to be incorporated into the research enterprise. Such integration provides a metaphorical sounding board where ponderings and wonderings emanating from my global wanderings are bounced off. As the writing of these key moments continued, it soon turned into a major part of the writing process where it was increasingly clear that it needed to be incorporated into the thesis, thereby situating me, my life and my research which were not discrete and separate from one and other (Murray 1996).

As a result this thesis diverges from a traditional presentation of academic material that would normally have included a formal literature review, a social research methods section and, data collection and data analysis (at least these appear to have become the dominant pattern). For the reasons I have just outlined material presented here is more experimental in its approach. Rather than presenting research data through traditional research collection instruments such as interviews, focus group transcripts, questionnaires or surveys I use auto-ethnography as my principle research method. I create an ethnographic account of my professional journey from community development worker to becoming a researcher. It is also a personal journey of my growth as a sexual being which is experience rich in the main because of the understanding I was shown by others on their own journey of growth. It was through numerous sexual encounters in Vietnam that I became aware of the high prevalence of gay men having unprotected sex. As it turned out, my lived experience of gay sex in Vietnam mirrored the findings of the early research that had been undertaken on this topic (see St. Pierre 1997, Wilson and Cawthorne 1999, Colby 2001). Yet my experiences also differed from these research findings too, in many ways. This led me, in addition to my memoir, to use a number of different approaches to consider phenomenologically how Vietnamese same sex attracted men might make sense and meaning of a number of different state-sanctioned and or controlled public pronouncements on HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in Vietnam.

The research that culminated in the production of this thesis was multi-disciplinary in nature incorporating a number of different critical paradigms. First, I use a memoir to retrospectively present fragments of lived processes and encounters. Secondly, I examine health promotion in general and HIV/AIDS health promotion in particular. Thirdly, I position my experience against the current literature. Fourthly, I reflexively locate my research in the still sensitive area of sex and sexuality research and the social construction of sex and sexuality; specifically homosexuality and what role the state has in such constructs; and finally, I consider the discursive practices used by Western researchers and health and development workers when reporting on HIV/AIDS and Vietnamese male-to-male erotic encounters in Vietnam. But, it is also a thesis that acknowledges the multiple selves that enter this research and positions and authenticates a person's life as being a legitimate and a vital component in the particular scholarly endeavour of understanding his male-to-male erotic encounters and how this provides pathways to a phenomenological consideration of Vietnamese male-to-male sexuality in the Vietnamese context, socially and politically.

The research presented in this thesis adds to a small number of recent studies of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in Vietnam. It is unique among studies of homosexuality in Vietnam in utilising auto-ethnography to explore sex and sexuality there, partly through a phenomenological framework using what Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as the alternation of orientation and disorientation as we find our way, and in addition partly through a critique of Vietnamese HIV/AIDS health communication strategies and constructions of sex and sexuality. The thesis adds to a growing number of studies that consider homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in South East Asia. Through an auto-ethnographic lens this thesis also constructs knowledge that is ethnographic, not in the sense of describing a culture, but in a more recent tradition of interest in the accidents of global-local predicaments (Clifford 1997): in this regard this thesis may be the only anthropological offering at present of a firsthand glimpse into a hitherto little researched aspect of same sex attracted men in Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam.

The memoir chapter documents certain parts of my life between 2000 and 2008. There is some reflection on formative events that go back much further than this period, however. The memoir also provides a reflexive opening in which to explore a

number of issues that confront researchers conducting research across cultures that are fraught with ethical, epistemological and methodological problems. As Sarah Ahmed (2006) writes in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, as we 'find our way' more often than not we become aware of the interlacing of all three domains (ethics, epistemology, method) in the person of the researcher and their relationships.

With the suspension (or bracketing, in the tradition of phenomenology) of a critical or political standpoint the memoir allows a narrative to emerge that is closer to the emotions and motivations that were lived in relationships and encounters that would shape the careful engagement I am now able to achieve as a social scientist. I do not, through this narrative, seek to claim a "special access" or "privileged vantage point", but simply try to traverse something of the mess and confusion within which the issue of sexual health and sex research is located.

As this thesis deals with questions of sexuality and identity management it was by engaging with the anthropological method of auto-ethnography as memoir that allowed me to negotiate these issues and my relationships in ways that provided a legitimate means to incorporate intuitive thinking derived from the experience of "living with" as I explored sex and sexuality in Vietnam; that is both my own and that of my interlocutors intuitions. Given that dis/covering sex/uality and understanding whom we desired was grounded in an era, at least for me, when sexuality was primarily constructed through shame (Gagnon and Simon 1973) and sex was unspoken and unknowable, it has indeed been quite a journey.³

Prelude

I first went to Vietnam in December 2000 to attend a community development conference. It was a number of positive experiences (professionally, socially as well as sexually) gained whilst in Vietnam that drew me back there, first as a language student

³ Sex being un-knowable for me in the sense that the word sex was never uttered in my family home in any conversations. Sex only become knowable in terms of procreation; never sex for enjoyment and what fell outside of sex in marriage was always spoken about pejoratively and imbued with the negative.

cum community development worker, then as a researcher, but also as a man attracted to men. In the Vietnamese context (and not just the cities) I felt more contentment with my identity as a sexual being than I had ever felt before, anywhere. I was unsure what it is/was about Vietnam as a place that allowed me to find that contentment; time, distance, anonymity or desire? Nevertheless, the experience of being desired by men I desired, for the first time in my life, had to be a major factor. A number of anthropologists have written of similar reasons for their field trips, not least Ralph Bolton (1996) and Stephen Murray (1996). While it was a place (the physical, built environment) that I returned to, it was the people, my friends and their acceptance of me that provided a space in the temporal realm where I was most content as a sexual being.

Initially I lived in District Three (Quận Ba) and later moved to a guest house Nhà Khách in District One (Quận Một): and on my return I only mixed and socialised with Vietnamese. As my confidence with my navigational and language abilities grew so did the distance I travelled; terrestrial and cultural. I eked out a social life with the people I met in day-to-day comings and goings. I communicated in my limited and inadequate Vietnamese with local street vendors, the domestic staff at the guest house and the people I met on the street, often with much hilarity as we tried to decipher what each of us was trying to communicate. Sometimes this was overcome, to some degree, with the aid of pen and paper and an English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese English dictionary. At other times the waving of hands and arms with funny gestures of our bodies bridged the communications impasse (see Gillespie 2008).

Over the following five years I stayed in the general vicinity of this house each and every time I returned to Vietnam. I ate at the same small street stalls, I drank iced coffee and green tea from the same and what seemed to be ever smaller street vendor businesses and, if my motor cycle was out of action, I used the same motor cycle taxi drivers (xe ôm, lit. motor hug), all of continued to congregate in the same area as I had first met them. I have no idea what people in this community thought of me, nor what they said when they gossiped about me; as my Vietnamese friends assured me they would. And I wonder, if their gossiping about me was any different to that about anybody else, or if it was just imaginary on the part of my Vietnamese friends or, for

that matter, if I attracted any more attention than did any other foreigner (*người nước ngoài*) in the general vicinity of my guest house.⁴ However, what I do know is that each time I returned to Ho Chi Minh City over the ensuing years, I was remembered by the same people. I was greeted with enthusiasm by each of the street entrepreneurs and some of my neighbours. They all remembered my name, but embarrassingly for me I had forgotten some of theirs. They would all say *lâu quá mới gặp* — ‘long time meet’—and they would enquire as to my health (*sức khỏe của tôi*) and that of my family’s (*sức khỏe của gia đình*). They asked me how long I was going to stay and they wished me good luck. Also, none of them refrained from commenting on my weight gain, *Oh Phillip mập - fat* or *Phillip mập hơn, fatter*. I felt that these greetings were always genuinely and warmly offered, but as the years rolled by I felt they became more genuine and warm each time I returned there. There was something about this, like, ‘How nice. its Phillip, he has come back to Vietnam again!’ and not ‘Oh no! Has he come here again!’

In the street life milieu around the intersection of Nguyen Trai, Le Thi Rieng and Cach Mang Thanh Tam Streets I became known as Mr. Phillip to some, and plain Phillip to others. This was a step up from ‘hey you’ or just ‘you’ being shouted in my direction as I walked by in the early days, which I had soon begun to ignore. Over time, my life became entangled with the lives of a number of my friends. I was invited to many weddings (*đám cưới*), birthdays (*sinh nhật*), Vietnamese New Year (*Tết*), funerals (*đám tang*), and other social engagements. As I started to view my friends in familial terms, the way we related to each other also changed (Airhihenbuwa 1995). Over the years I became very much a part of a number of these families and they still see me as part of their extended families today, as I feel they are part of mine. I realise that many trained in anthropology might find this acknowledgment of sentiment simplistic and even suspect; but as I have already explained, in my narrative I have deliberately bracketed that perspective in order to acknowledge what are feelings that are part and parcel of the experiences I recount. In this respect it should be remembered that the events and relationships I am recalling did not take place under deliberate fieldwork conditions, but took shape before I commenced research, indeed they are the

⁴ In this general vicinity there were a number of guest houses that provided both short and long term accommodation to people, most of whom were foreigners.

experiences that in the end led me to see the need to address the question of men who have sex with men in Vietnam.

Initially, my small HCMC social life centred on and around my home, aided by the small group of people I had come in contact with. I created a space within the tight and frenetic pace of the city to exist (Gillespie 2008): an outsider, but also someone genuinely interested in what was happening around me. At one metre eighty six centimetres tall (6'2") and ninety kilograms (14 stone or 198 pounds) there was no point in my trying to blend into the background. I stood out much like a lighthouse does on a promontory in the dark of night. The only limitation placed on me was my own lack of confidence to explore further afield than what was initially geographically familiar to me. I was happy to go anywhere my friends and sometimes total strangers wanted to take me. I was completely and utterly in their hands. But I trusted them and never doubted their desire to show me their city, or to show me off for that matter. Nor did I ever fear for my personal safety. It was a time where I was confronted with and offered an extraordinarily different life from that with which I was familiar (Gillespie 2008), and I accepted almost every offer to explore what was unfamiliar to me geographically, culturally and, within reason, erotically⁵ (Bolton 1996; Murray 1996).

While I explored the landscape in an attempt to seek anchoring points to orient myself by (Ahmed 2000) I also explored the sexual landscape that was on offer, which was unfamiliar to me and requiring orientation. Being disorientated geographically and sexually at the same time provided me the unique experience of asking similar questions of both experiences as I was to 'find my way' (Ahmed 2000, p1). What was it that I was experiencing? – I had one male friend who had a boyfriend who identified himself by announcing 'I'm a gay,'⁶ yet my friend did not identify as gay himself and he wanted to get married (to a woman). Their shared life was not hidden from me; they lived it in front of me but I was not allowed to refer to my friend's lover as his

⁵ I was aware of a number of times where I thought women were flirting with me and had I wanted to I could have possibly pursued a sexual relationship or encounter. While I cannot be one hundred percent certain about this, it seemed eminently possible and, as well my Vietnamese language teacher had on several occasions passed on messages from her female friends whom I had met, that they liked me and wanted to go out with me.

⁶ Not long after first meeting Duc he began to refer to himself as "I'm a gay".

boyfriend. I was somewhat confused by this. This was not unlike the disorientation I felt navigating the city. One night I was returning to my room after a concert I attended in Nguyen Du St when I got bamboozled approaching an intersection I thought I was familiar with. Approaching it from a different direction I could not work out where I was in Ho Chi Minh City. Both of these experiences, together with numerous others, alerted me to my parallel learning; geographically and sexually: the two were intertwined.

I was navigating my way around both new spaces simultaneously. What was it that I was seeing here, and where was it that I was going? I stumbled a few times and lost my way a number of times; turning this way instead of that way; looking at something that was familiar but not recognising it for what it was, thinking that it was in the wrong spot, when in fact it was exactly where it should have been or, in the case of my friend and his lover unsure of what the relationship was or could be. But I was coming at the intersection from a different direction than I had before, and having initially understood their relationship through the prism of my culture and generation's understanding of sex and sexuality. These moments of disorientation were important moments of not knowing, yet there was something familiar about these scenes, moments of disorientation so important as precursors leading to moments of trying to work it out, of finding my way, of 'becoming orientated' (Ahmed 2006 p158).

In the process of orienting myself, geographically, I was amazed at the number of times Vietnamese men would speak to me in the street, at the pool, in coffee shops, parks, shopping centres, night and day striking up conversations ultimately wanting to have sex with me; not all, of-course, but many. I am now in no doubt that the process of finding spatial bearings, even of being physically and constantly lost, assisted in orienting me to issues of sex/uality and identity formation. I knew the pool was a cruising spot, at the time, but not the other locations. For me, as it turned out, Vietnam generally but Ho Chi Minh City specifically was the gayest and most gay friendly city I'd known. Not that I could claim a great deal of international research, but it was certainly different from everyday life in Melbourne. This too was disorientating for me. Everything I had read to prepare myself had told me that gay life in Vietnam was minimal and certainly there was no gay community. Yet, everywhere I went I was

confronted with unspoken signs of the possibility of sex, with women and men, but mainly men. Contrary to Murray's (1996) early travels in Latin America, where his "radar" only picked up static, my gaydar⁷ was in overdrive.

After my first eight-month stay in Vietnam I returned to Australia, for no clear reason. My Vietnamese lessons had finished and I needed to negotiate with the Faculty about completing the balance of the hours required in the Graduate Diploma in Modern Languages that I was enrolled in at the time. I knew that I wanted to continue with post-graduate studies and I had a germ of an idea that I wanted to flesh out. As I had grown attached to my new friends and my new life I felt an overwhelming concern because so many of my own sexual encounters led to the possibility of being able to participate in unsafe sex practices should I wish to. I wanted to understand this and why it was not just possible, but prevalent. As I pondered the possibilities and renegotiated re-entry to the society I had left eight months earlier, I set about writing an application to commence a research degree in the hope that I could contribute to the wellbeing of my newfound friends, except I did not know how to go about it.

My intuition was leading me to think that Western discursive strategies that focused on HIV/AIDS prevention and education were not reaching men who had sex with men in Vietnam. I was unsure why, but knew that part of it had something to do with language use and what constituted sex. So-many men that had sought me out, or I them, for sex, did not use the term "gay" or an equivalent as an identity, but some did. None referred to themselves or others as being homosexual/s and I have never heard the term homosexuality (or its equivalent) used in any conversation. However, three experiences that were initially perplexing helped focus my thinking. The first perplexing encounter I had was with a young man in Hoi An wanting me to, in his words, 'do gay with me'; the second was witnessing a military policeman fondling his friend as they relaxed, without any concern for who may have seen him; and the third was kissing a married guy in front of his in-laws on a bus. It was these incidents that led me to begin to doubt my preconceived understanding of what was and was not "gay" (not just in Vietnam, but anywhere). In particular I began to question the Western biomedical binary of hetero/homo/sex/ual/ity/. That framework now appeared

⁷ Gaydar is a term used by many Western gay writers to describe that innate system that many gay men have in sussing out men that may have similar sexual interest in men.

to be deficient in a non-Western context, where there is a complexity more nuanced than this binarism can accommodate. And of course, I was to learn this is not a new insight (see Dowsett 1999, and also Altman 2001).

However, as I had always considered this binarism, at its heart, as being limited and *limiting* in how I wanted to live my life and how I wanted to be seen as an individual, I was even more determined to proceed with my research. I have never wanted to be only defined by my sexuality. I privately rail against the need to publicly disclose a label that essentialises me as one category of person within a sexual binary because of what I do in bed and with whom. This does not mean I don't use the term gay as a shorthand way to overcome some social situations where explanation is necessary, but only because there is deficiency in language to express oneself outside this binarism and I do not want to appear to be nuts. Similarly, I have never found myself identifying with homosexuality and gay life-styles as sub-cultures. While I fully understand the political use of these terms, and the benefits derived from feelings of belongingness this engenders, to be honest my personality and upbringing have left me uncomfortable with any identifications that would leave me feeling I was part of a sub-section or underclass in the community, or that I was deviant. For me this cannot be dismissed simply by placing blame with "the community", but appears to accompany the process of naming. I therefore tend to sympathise with what may be experiences structured in a similar way within different cultures where a similar reification was/has been/is going on and fear of the possible damage it can cause. Western development workers have been and are foisting Western biomedical notions of sex and sexuality onto non-Western communities where sex/uality are lived very differently. That model seemed completely out of place in the Vietnamese context where male same-sex eroticism is permissible and homosexuality is not: but homosexuality (and as far as I can see this remains a foreign and bureaucratic term) is by-and-large constructed very differently in Vietnam than that represented in Western health workers' understandings, experiences and discourse.

It is true that my self-revelations can only go a very small way in revealing the other selves and the other people who enter the story of this research. Does 'suspending the critical and political' in favour of a reflexive personal account go closer

to or further from acknowledging those other selves? Through an unusual, or is it quite ordinary, history of sex and travel I clearly have arrived at a place where I am able to share in a concern for the health and wellbeing of Vietnamese men. And it is in the second part of the thesis that I move from the reflexive to the grounded and critical.

Overview of thesis structure

The title of my thesis is *Kissing and Holding Hands: Constructions of Male Same-Sex Attraction and Implications for HIV/AIDS Risk in Vietnam*. In this introductory chapter I have examined the way the thesis and its problems came together as a project, and also how that process raised questions of orientation that I believe apply not just to me, but must be taken into account more generally if the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS among Vietnamese men is to be remotely successful.

Chapter Two considers male same sex/uality in the Vietnamese context and considers the relevance of framing Vietnamese male same-sex eroticism using this Western biomedical polemical binary in understanding male-to-male erotic encounters in Vietnam. I highlight weaknesses in the current research when systemising homosexuality in Vietnam. What is deemed homosexuality in Anglo-European cities, or what is lived as gay culture in those same cities, has very different meanings than the experiences of men in Vietnam. As will also be made evident, the Vietnamese State has a very different picture again of what discourses of homosexuality represent, and this in turn shapes the way they apply these to their own population.

Chapter Three introduces the 'dramatis personae', the people whose lives interweaved with mine during several periods in Vietnam. It is important to me that these people have some semblance of a life before they enter mine, and I therefore hope to create a basis for readers' identifying a "face" to accompany the names that appear in the text. While these portraits are brief re-textualisations, I hope they begin to paint a picture of my friends that better positions the reader in seeing them as people rather than research subjects. But also it is placed here because I want to recognise the centrality and the importance of these people and our friendships to me and what a profound influence they have had on my life and this project. I do not want

them to appear in, or as, an appendix to this thesis or my life, a practice that so often occurs.

Chapter Four is the auto-ethnography titled *Approaching the Orient*. The choice of title is meant to be provocative. It is a play on words. The reader could view this volume as how I approach becoming “oriented” in a strange and unfamiliar environment; physically and sexually, a journey of becoming. Alternatively, the reader may see it in post-colonial terms of a privileged gay white male with little sexual acceptance in his own country seeking pleasure, hitherto denied him but now available in a strange and exotic location away from the prying eyes of those who repress him. Maybe it is a coming out story (Altman 2002). Whatever it is, it remains an ethnographic account of part of my life in Vietnam. This chapter forms the foundation by which I move from my lived experiences and observations to offer a different understanding to that in current literature and research on same-sex attracted men in Vietnam.

Let me be clear, *Approaching the Orient* is constructed retrospectively, well after the occurrence of the events it records. It is an experiential base that opens a ground for a reflexive discussion on what is sex and sexuality in the Vietnamese context.

Chapter Five, *From Beds to Desks: The Journey from Lovers to Memoir*, straddles the two different approaches taken with this thesis, but in fact this chapter links them together (like Istanbul straddles the Bosphorus). It is a bridge between the two different parts of the thesis. In *Approaching the Orient* I position myself so that a reader meets me firstly as an auto-ethnographer. In the chapters around chapter five I am a researcher cum social scientist. I traverse that space between being a person who is a traveller to that person who becomes a researcher and then back to a hopefully very different person, a self who is more alert to his surroundings, critical of what is happening around him. I was a person who was looking to orient himself in the Orient as a man who desires men, then as a social scientist; concerned for my new friends and more broadly same-sex attracted men in Vietnam in general. The auto-ethnography allows me to reveal a host of contradictions and identity management issues that I confronted concerning sex and sexuality that are not dissimilar to those of my Vietnamese friends and/or sexual interlocutors.

I bring together the reflexive and provocatively titled *Approaching the Orient* with the second endeavour of the thesis in *Orienting the Approach*. I discuss ethics and the sensitivities of researching topics that are taboo. Sex and sexuality research attracts a great deal of scrutiny because of the way the subject matter circulates within powerful discourses originating primarily in the West and projected outwards in ways that are complicating sex and power everywhere else. I am not sure my employing an auto-ethnographic approach or memoir as a technique to retrospectively record an experience-rich anthropology of homoerotic encounters between a “Westerner” and “the natives,” in an “exotic location” reduces or heightens that impact. However, what I hope that the memoir can achieve is a change in focus. I want to disturb the gaze of surveillance. That is, the gaze moves from that being on my friends as research subjects to being on me, the researcher. I know that in a world (“my” world and its wider impacts) that continues to vilify same-sex attracted men and women the focus on the self in academic contexts for “queers” means something quite different to a similar focus structured around “straight” subject positions. To borrow a phrase, the personal is the political. At the same time, by recording and interrogating the events of my life I go somewhat along the way of protecting my friends and the integrity of these friendships from the gaze of the reader that cannot be achieved in more traditional social science research techniques. I am also conscious that my work might possibly play a role in advertising Vietnam as an exciting and exotic gay travel venue, but I know that that process is already well advanced and that any impact my research might have in that respect is miniscule.

Chapter Six analyses selected publicly displayed HIV/AIDS awareness billboards in Ho Chi Minh City, and the absence of any representation of same-sex attracted men in them. I also consider what it means to observe the lack of any accessible and meaningful safe sex messages for same-sex attracted Vietnamese men in public contexts.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, the conclusion, I draw the threads of this thesis together to address the contemporary conundrum and urgent need Vietnamese same-sex attracted men have for effective and appropriate HIV/AIDS education and prevention materials in ways that avoid what I call the crisis of communication in sex and sexuality

in non-Western settings. I also conclude that contemporary representations of sex and sexuality as essentialised Western discourses are colonising modern Vietnamese expressions of sex and sexuality. This observation ultimately leads to the conclusion that Western essentialisations such as MSM and homosexuality, where sex between two men so often assumes something along the lines of homosexual identity formation is playing into the state's construction of homosexuality as transvestism, a conflation that in turn leads to further discrimination and stigmatises a little understood group of men in Vietnam. And because the state links research on MSM and homosexuality to transvestism, a large number of same-sex attracted men are allowed to believe they are not at risk of infection because they don't see themselves in the essentialised images employed in HIV/AIDS campaigns.

Chapter: 2

Same-Sex Attracted Men in HCMC

Vietnamese men today are fashioning diverse ways of living as men-who-love-men, drawing variously on endogenous traditions and identities as well as exogenous concepts and practices, combining and recombining them, and at the same time contesting both cultural conventions that would condemn homosexuality as incompatible with filial piety and metropolitan notions that would insist there is only one way to be authentically gay.

Frank Proschan 1998

Introduction

How do we write about homo/sex/uality or same-sex sexuality experienced in different cultural contexts and not attempt to universalise these experiences in terms of the Western biomedical sexual taxonomy? As Leila Rupp notes in a seminal paper on sexuality across different cultures and times, ‘...sometimes such manifestations cannot really be considered “same-sex”, and sometimes they should not really be labelled “sexuality”’ (Rupp 2001 p. 287). Yet, do we not face a further challenge, when researching across cultures, that is similar to that which Jeffery Masten has noted in relation to work on Renaissance England, of not wanting to ‘...deny homosexuality in the past and seemingly to erase the traces of a “gay history” that has only recently begun to speak this name’ (Masten 1997 p. 5-6). It is no easy task, and like Masten I acknowledge that this project is informed by and articulated from the ‘modern discourse of homosexuality’ (Masten 1997 p. 6). But I resist, where possible, the urge to use the language of that discourse to describe people I met or the sexual encounters I was party to in Vietnam.

In this chapter I will argue that exclusively relying upon Western biomedical understandings to define a bifurcated sexuality that is either homosexual or heterosexual ignores the contours of local Vietnamese social meanings attributed to sex and sexuality and relegates those local understandings to a position of less importance than Eurocentric understandings. In relation to HIV/AIDS this then privileges Western health and development workers' discourse and understanding of HIV/AIDS prevention as being the only construction of same-sex attracted men in HIV prevention and in Vietnam this construct ends up ignoring same-sex attracted men, a predicament I will discuss at length in Chapter 6.

Defining Homosexuality in Vietnam

There is a paucity of literature in either English or Vietnamese of a history of homosexuality in Vietnam. What do exist are interpretations of French colonialist writing (see Jacolliot 1896 cited in Carrier et al 1997) that reflect the usual colonial and orientalist assumptions (see Proschan 2002 & 2002b and Blanc 2005) of feminine men. A number of scholars have written on the histories of homosexuality in East Asia and Southeast Asia⁸ such as Mark McLelland for Japan (2000), Peter Jackson for Thailand(1999 & 2001), Tom Boellstorff for Indonesia(2005). There has been quite a lot of new work appearing on China, including that by Fran Martin (2008), Loretta Ho (2007), Elaine Jeffreys (2007), Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson (2005), to name only a few. However there are none that address homosexuality in any depth in Vietnam. Aronson (1999) brings together a selection of historical references and observations in a section of his paper that spans several hundred years, but it is not a historical study and no analytical conclusion is made other than the lack of agreement in the sources on a lineal development of homosexuality in Vietnam. Vietnam has been strongly influenced by the Chinese (historical occupations and colonial migrations) and much of contemporary Vietnam's food, language, and people are of Chinese heritage. While there is no documentary evidence to show that this influence extends to sexual values or mores I don't think it is unreasonable to assume that this influence does exist. In

⁸ Considering Vietnam's Confucian heritage and its position within Southeast Asia the research taking place in these two diverse regions of Asia does contain much material that helps in negotiating questions of sexuality in Vietnam.

particular, I am drawn to the work of several Sino-scholars including that of Bret Hinsch (1990) and Wu Cuncun (2004) because both articulate a rich and extensive tradition of male same-sex sexuality and eroticism in China and by association I link Vietnam to this history. Also I am drawn to Wu who asks as a result of this long history about the appropriate use of the term homosexual/ity being used in this historical context:

If same-sex unions enjoyed such a long history of popularity and semi-acceptance in China, and played such an important role in cultural life, should we then ask in what ways they might differ from what is called homosexuality in other cultural and historical contexts? And, indeed, whether 'homosexuality' is the correct term? (Wu 2004 p. 5)

Now, while these scholars are referring to the historical pre-imperialist period I believe that this same question is relevant to Vietnam today. And while the period of French colonisation remains to be adequately researched, one cannot ignore the relatively long period of isolation Vietnam had experienced from the wider world during the second half of the twentieth century when looking at contemporary homosexuality there. In geopolitical and social terms Vietnam's exposure to the global world system, despite the American War, is only relatively recent. My point is, it would be foolish to ignore the possibility that Vietnam has had a long tradition of male same-sex activity similar to that of China, given the widespread use of classical Chinese at the Vietnamese court and considering that scholar-bureaucrats visiting China from the sixteenth century onward were unlikely to not meet scholar-officials in China who were caught up in a homoerotic fashion that continued to surround official life (Wu 2004). While the historical hard work waits to be done I am convinced enough to assume the existence of such an influence long before Vietnam's exposure to Western terms such as homosexual/ity and heterosexual/ity and any retrospective application of a western homosexual discourse to explain contemporary male same-sex sex or identity could create misunderstandings. For HIV/AIDS education this is important. As Wu explains:

One of the most difficult problems to negotiate in any historical investigation such as I am making here is the inevitable entry of contemporary categories and

perspectives where they might create misunderstandings and misrecognition (Wu 2004 p. 6).

Both Wu and Masten cite David Halperin where he instructs us to:

suspend our projects of identification (or disavowal, as the case maybe) long enough to devise an interpretation of erotic experiences... that foreground the historical and cultural specificity of those experiences (Halperin 1990, cited in Masten 1994 p6, and Wu 2004 p6).

In my chapter *Approaching the Orient* I hope that I have achieved just such a thoughtful suspension of any application of contemporary categorical terms. Following Rupp, Halperin, Wu and Masten I don't use homosexual or homosexuality as either a noun or as descriptor of people based on sexual behaviour. I do use the terms gay, gay-men and gay-sex because they have (slightly) less historical baggage and in a contemporary sense have more fluidity in their use and meaning. This approach fits better with a social constructionist belief that sex and sexual identity is better understood through cultural meanings and historical contexts, although I don't assume for a moment that my own approach curtails all risk of contributing to misunderstanding. Unfortunately, as the aforementioned scholars appear to understand, despite our best efforts our statements can always be misconstrued by those who want to jump to conclusions (or confirm prejudices).

Social and Sexual Subjectivities:

Masten, Wu and Halperin have cautioned researchers to be alert in not naively applying modern notions of sex/uality to different historical contexts, and I am attempting to heed their cautions when reflecting on contemporary same-sex practices and identity construction in contemporary Vietnam. Furthermore, even in countries that share a similar modernist trajectory, notions of identity, in particular sexual identity, are complex. When you add sexual behaviour to this equation it is easy to reveal a panoply of contradictions. Takagi (1996), for example, discusses a conundrum relating to sexualities whereby some people identify as straight but engage in

homosexual behaviour, and others identify as gay but engage in heterosexual sex. Adam (2000) states bi-sexuality exists more as a behaviour rather than as an identity and, most male-to-male sex takes place with men who do not identify with the term/label gay or are associated with a gay community (Altman 1995; Jackson & Sullivan 1999).

In Western countries, broadly speaking, there is no equivocation as to what is defined as sex or sexuality – sexual identities or labels. Simply, if one party to the sex act is a man and the other a woman it is regarded as heterosexual sex or if it is two people of the same gender participating then it is regarded as homosexual sex. Generally, community assumptions then prescribe a sexual identity to these people as a result of what they are doing sexually: either as a heterosexual or a homosexual or, for those who do it with both men and women, conveniently they are labelled as bi-sexual. An example of such a community assumption is if two men were to be seen holding hands in public they would be deemed as being most likely gay; two men passionately kissing in public would unequivocally be identified as gay. But, as Rupp rightly notes, 'kissing.., is not a universal erotic act, although it has a very long history in the Western world' (2001 p.300).

Throughout the non-Western world a person's identity is very much bound up in and relative to family and kinship (Berry 2001). Boellstorff (n.d.) argues that there is a paradox of behaviour and identity, and posits that behaviour shapes identity. But, what if a person does not believe what they are doing is in fact sex. How then does that affect identity making? In Thailand studies have shown that less than fifty percent of men and women surveyed thought that male-to-male oral or anal sex constituted an act of sex, whilst nearly one hundred percent considered oral sex between a man and a woman was sex per se (Jackson 1999b). In Vietnam, men can often be seen walking in the street holding the hand of another man. I have had my hand held by numerous men in public there, without the slightest connotation being attached to such an act as either sex or an identity prescription being applied, with the only exception being that of raised eye-brows by other expatriates. Even kissing between two men in Vietnam is less problematic than it is in the West. This was demonstrated a number of times when I was kissed in public by men in Vietnam with no obvious social disapproval being

displayed by those nearby. The first time this happened I was at an outdoor night club in Chau Doc with a mixed Vietnamese and Western clientele, but by no means an exclusively gay clientele. The second time I was on a bus trip between Dalat and Pleiku where another man kissed me in full view of other passengers including his farther-in-law. On three other occasions I was passionately kissing men in private surroundings thinking of the erotic connotations I attached to this behaviour, only to be mistaken and having my further sexual advances politely declined.

The consequences of this kind of mismatch in the health education context could be dire. Initially in respect to the HIV/AIDS epidemic it became problematic to only rely upon Western concepts of homosexual/ity and homosexual sex as risk factors for HIV infection. Because most men around the world who have sex with men do not identify with this Western construct of sex, the term men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) was developed to reach out and include these men. The basic assumption being made here was that even though those men who fuck men don't always identify as being gay or homosexual they would understand what they were doing was indeed sex, but in failing to problematise the term sex the term MSM itself remains problematic, as I aim to demonstrate in relation to the practices of Vietnamese men.

MSM - Men-who-have-sex-with-men

The term's [MSM] racializing imperatives, easy conflation of varied cultural practices, over simplification and sometimes negation of sexual desire, pleasure and love...raise serious doubts about its universal and mostly uncritical application across health and development fields.

Andil Gosine 2009 p 29

MSM is an English language term that did not exist in the public health setting before HIV/AIDS. It was developed to specifically address the numerous permutations of male same-sex attracted men in non Western settings and their analogous sexual activities in an attempt to accommodate the various social meanings which are attached to such behaviour. It therefore avoids pejorative stereotypical community

assumptions attached to homosexuality and the culturally loaded, and sensitive notions of gayness, gay identity politics and sex for men for whom MSM and homosexuality has no meaning. In Western public health settings using MSM to cover the whole panoply of male same-sex sexual activities without compromising a person's sexual identity has, by-and-large, been a successful strategy in HIV/AIDS prevention and education because there is no real equivocation as to what is deemed as sex in these contexts, so the focus has been on the sex act rather than who is or is not a poof. However, in non-Western settings, including some minority communities such as black and Hispanic sections of the community in the USA, MSM is problematic (Gosine 2009). In Vietnam MSM – men-who-have-sex-with-men has no meaning for most people as there is no direct equivalent translation, and what is translated is rendered useless because it is not understood (Wilson and Crawthorne 1999).

Talking of sex

Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic researchers in industrialised countries researching HIV/AIDS have constructed their approaches and embedded their findings within 'the concept of a Western heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, (Astana and Osstvogels 2001 p 707) whereby it is the genitalia of one's object of sexual desire or that of your sex partner that defines you and ascribes an identity for life as either that of a homosexual or heterosexual. Current HIV/AIDS discourse, with the exception of MSM as an all encompassing term, has evolved little over 30 years. Gay men and homosexuals were the first identifiable/labelable group the disease was diagnosed in; hence the AIDS antecedent GRID – gay related immune deficiency. When prevention programs commenced MSM was added to the homosexual spectrum in an attempt to provide cover for all male-to-male sexual identities and sexual behaviours. As terms, homosexuality, MSM and gay continue to be applied interchangeably in research and development reports both in Western industrialised countries and in developing countries. MSM also finds its way into development language to accommodate cultural differences in understanding homosexuality. This identity ascription is irrespective of how the individual views or identifies themselves, or how people understand a sexual encounter. But the authors of these reports can still be understood to be ascribing a

Western biomedical label. While subscribing to a social constructionists approach to sexuality that acknowledges culture, context and language most researchers, social scientists and development workers think they are accommodating such variance, however their need to communicate in highly politicised policy contexts means they continue to be bound by the limitations of Western knowledge, language and discourse on sex/uality.

However, a social constructionist stance of sexuality accommodates variance across time and place. It allows consideration for the notion of whether it is same-sex attracted men, gay men, men that have sex with men, same sex sexuality or what people do is actually sex. That is, it is context dependant within a cultural social milieu that is not constant (Altman 2007; Rupp 2001; Parker & Easton 1998; Vance 1991) and where whatever it is we are trying to write about is not a homogenously understood phenomena. However researchers still struggle with language to describe it and their need for labelling it, and by labelling it only 'defines people in terms of their sexuality alone' (Sharma 2008 cited in Cornwall and Correa 2008 p. 10).

Influenced by the approaches of Vance (1991), Altman (1995), and Parker and Easton (1998) I am committed to a social constructionist perspective on sexuality. I reject the Western biomedical sex/uality dichotomy of homo/heterosexual as the only entry into understanding sexual behaviour and sexual identity because of the essentialist ascriptions and fixed sexual labels it espouses (Asthana and Oostvogels 2001). Furthermore, the genealogy of AIDS and its antecedent GRID sees HIV/AIDS research and discourse still using this hetero/homosexual dichotomy (Asthana & Oostvogels 2001) and I wish to highlight its weaknesses. Furthermore, I am not committed to any one term or word to describe homosexuality, as Rupp is with 'same-sex sexuality' (2001 p 287) or Asthana and Oostvogels do with 'male-male sexuality' (2001 p 711). For Rupp using same-sex sexuality 'gets beyond the use of terms such as "queer," "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual" (2001 p 287); in a slightly different vein Asthana and Oostvogels aim with their coining to encompass 'the spectrum of identities held by MSM' (2001 p711). A laudable endeavour to find better language to articulate a broader cross-cultural understanding of gay, homosexual and MSM as we understand them to be, but these terms remain heavily Western terms and are not completely

successful in their attempt to divest themselves of cultural baggage (and therefore do not always capture the more finely grained discussion that accompanies them). In observing how 'sometimes such manifestations [recorded in ethnographic literature] cannot really be considered "same sex," and sometimes they should not really be labelled sexuality' (Rupp 2001 p 287), Rupp shows the difficulties faced by researchers working in cross-cultural contexts in this field. Nevertheless, alternatives are not thick on the ground. So, for researchers, social scientists and development workers working in English within Western epistemologies, baggage laden English is still the only language we have to communicate our ideas and arguments. Meanwhile the academy seems to be hell bent on clear and succinct cross-cultural equivalents with no area for ambiguity. I don't expect this search for a universal, almost mathematical code will prove very fruitful.

The problem is quite clear in the way Rupp discusses notions of sex which are fluid and not embedded and are not fixed or, affixed with categorical labels and even where it is not related to biological definitions of masculinity or femininity. Asthana and Oostvogels also provide a clear picture of the importance of homosocial cultural practices in India that allow for men sharing beds, holding hands and bathing together in a context which provides both a social space and community acceptance of and for men to experience same sex desire and same sex genital contact, and this is possible because masculinity is more defined as being married and fathering children than it is by genitalised identities or acts. A similar situation exists in Vietnam where in their report *Sexual Relations Between Migrating Populations (Vietnamese with Mexican and Anglo) and HIV/STD Infections in Southern California* fifteen years earlier Carrier, Nguyen and Su established the importance of this homosocial space for their respondents' when they were adolescent boys to experience same-sex behaviour. Notions of Vietnamese masculinity are not defined by being strong or having a muscular body, playing football or fucking girls. Men are called boys until their mid thirties or when they get married, whichever is the first to occur; and this is irrespective of employment, dress, tonal inflection – as in sounding girly- living arrangements or girl friend status.

In Vietnam the number of men searching web based internet sites looking for men for sex dramatically diminishes when men hit their 30s compared with men in their teens or 20s. There could be many explanations for this however the greatest social pressure on men is to get married, and most men will have discharged this duty and have got married by their mid thirties. The second societal expectation placed on them is fathering a child. While there are other explanations for the decline in the numbers of men in their 30s looking for sex with other men (and we have to question whether it makes sense from their point of view to call it sex), the sheer rapidity in the decline in numbers of this cohort indicates that men opt for marriage. I write about two men, Vinh and Đức, who exemplify this problem in different ways in Chapter 4, where Vinh wants to get married and have children and Đức marries because he feels he had to. Đức told me on numerous occasions that he has no feelings for his wife and hates having to talk to her on the telephone when she calls each night from the US; as he says, 'I did it for my Mum'.

Representations of Homosexuality in Vietnamese Media

The Vietnamese local media represents homosexuality in terms differently than that of the Western dichotomous model of homo/hertero/sexual/ity, but it can't be assumed that this means it in any way refers to the practices and understandings of the majority of MSM. An example of this appeared on page seven of the widely read *Thanh niên & Cuộc sống* (Youth and Life) newspaper on Friday 8 November 2002 (see appendix 1 and the English translation see appendix 2). My Vietnamese friend Mark said 'This is about gay in Vietnam' when he gave it to me. I did not need to understand the full text to understand the mixed messages it contained. Across the top of the page screams, *A scandal at a gymnasium: A warning about risks of sexual abuse and HIV infection*. Thereafter there is no copy to support the banner, nothing. This banner headline is followed by the drumming up of sympathy '...[for] homosexuals, who are inherently homosexuals [not fake ones], and who themselves "don't want to be homosexuals".' Under this appears a large photo of women - taking three columns in this four column paper – titled *A fashion show of gays*, followed by the title of the text it refers to in bold and larger font, *A world of gays*.

Combining the text with the photograph the editors of the newspaper clearly want readers to see these figures as being men dressed as women: transvestites. This then feeds into community stereotypes of men having sex with men as being effeminate. Carrier's report continues whereby 'The image of the person in the forefront of the photo is that of a female figure wearing a floral dress with three-quarter length sleeves, hands on hips in a cat-walk-pose, in-fact he/she has had her photograph taken while on a cat walk; it is the hands and swagger that give it away. The author of the text or the page editor wants readers to believe this is a disco (even while referring to it as a fashion show), but it is not. There is an MC holding a microphone and the people in the background are not dancing, they are watching a fashion show. I have been to two fashion shows like this myself. These are private social occasions. The men on the *runway* are dressed in drag. Behind this feminine figure in the foreground of the photograph are other people. Seven are clearly outlined and one only partially. The partially visible figure on the right I think is male as is the MC on the left. The remaining could be described as feminine, some have outlines of breasts, some don't. Maybe these figures are of women, maybe they are men dressed as women, maybe they are of transsexuals with breast implants. They may even be gay men in drag, but what they are not, as the article wants people to believe, is a typical representation of Vietnamese gay men.

The text of this article opens with Benny who is a very young gay 'sexy' in a tight dress asking the passing waiter to get him and his sweetheart two beers. Benny preferred wearing makeup than shaving and did not like his masculine name *Dũng*. So now Benny is "half-man half-woman". Benny lists, for the reporter, the nasty names people call him because he is gay. *Bóng*⁹ – shadow, half-women half-man, *be* – faggot, *men* – feminine man, or *đỗ xăng pha nhớt* – mix of petrol and oil.

⁹ There are a number of different uses for the term *bóng*. This was explained by my friend Loi as, "The root of this meaning may be from the way Vietnamese call actors of traditional theatre who were usually men. But in most cases were cast in women's roles on the stage. This can be seen in many Chinese movies. But *bóng* is also the word used to describe ceremonial women who usually sit in a central position during religious service / mass for the dead. She calls to the soul of the dead people to possess / incarnate her body. These women always wear flashy makeup, and wear bright and colourful clothes. So when we see a man wearing women's clothes we call them *bóng*. The second popular use of the term *bóng* is in the meaning of shadow as in a metaphor. Not meaning half dark or half light. The positive use refers to the role of fathers or husbands in a family, who work and support their wife and children. Like an

The next person we are introduced to in this article is Lâm, another 'feminised' boy. 'Lâm sits, stands or drinks in a shy way and speaks in a soft voice'. When he and some friends went for a picnic he whispered 'I don't like riding a bicycle, I prefer you giving me a lift on your bicycle please'. The third gay we meet is a famous hairdresser Luynh who has purchased all sorts of consumer items for his lover to keep him happy. But alas, his lover left him for a female. However, never-mind, Luynh has financial security, it is easy for him to attract young boys irrespective of whether the boys like gay sex, want romantic love or desire money. He can get them because he is rich. To finish the article Chung, the poor vegetable seller at the market, laments that all his boyfriends betray him and that when the money has gone, love falls apart.

An article that Carrier, Nguyen and Su reported on that appeared in *The Vietnamese Weekly Newspaper* in 1992 is remarkable for its similar sentiment as to this article where Benny and his friends appear. This article asks and states "Is homosexuality a disease?...homosexual men are feminine ('they walk like women, have soft hands, are talented in sewing, makeup, cooking and singing" (Carrier et al 1997 p 240).

Completing the four column wide page is an article titled: *MSM và nguy cơ nhiễm HIV- MSM and a high risk of HIV infection*. This article did accurately reflect the research findings of three different research reports. These cover research findings such as MSM are at a higher risk of infection to HIV, but in Vietnam MSM were at higher risk of infection 'due to the high numbers of sexual partners, high rates of unsafe sex and inconsistent condom use'. This article is also ambivalent as to whether HIV exists in the MSM in Vietnam, stating 'if HIV exists in the MSM community...', and then it finishes with 'The fact that MSM peer educators are trained to provide outreach services to MSM community has contributed to the decrease of risk of the infection for HIV infection in Vietnam'. At the bottom of the article is a photograph of four people, two of whom are referred to as HIV/AIDS peer educators and two who are MSM. However I believe that this photograph, like the photograph in the Benny story, is not

umbrella for wife and children to shade or shelter from sun and rain. For example if I say I live under my father's *bóng* means my father takes good care of me, gives me food, gives me clothes and gives me education. In this use it also implies a negative too. If I was to say that I cannot escape from the *bong* of my father, it mean I cannot get away from his power, money and influence".

what (or where) the articles pretend them to be. On a first glance it could be construed as health workers addressing farm workers, labourers or homeless men, but it is unlikely that they are gay men or would be recognised as such by gay men. I say this not because I imagine gay men look or appear one way or another, but because the social semiotics available in the images point to very different possibilities. The men sitting on the mat are dressed in a manner that indicates that they are not office workers or urban professionals or even male sex workers. Furthermore, the two peer educators are not two men; one is a man, the other is a women. They can hardly be MSM peer educators given the context of MSM peer work in Vietnam: no Western researcher or research team would engage women to be MSM peer educators.¹⁰ There is a possibility they may be HIV educators, but if so it is more likely they are educating drug users, or building site labourers, not acting as peers of MSM.

The final article on this full page is titled: Đồng tính ái là gì? *What is homosexuality?* The article quotes the Head of the Education and Health Department in Ho Chi Minh City, Dr Trương Trọng Hoàng. This article essentially reinforces the castigatory tone made by the other articles on this page. That is, there are many fake homosexuals who only experiment with gay sex and return to the natural way and get married, and that true homosexuals don't want to be gay and they are sad and can only attract other men if they have money. He also states that '[overt or out-and-out] homosexuals have no hesitancy in admitting their homosexuality and in practicing it openly. They prefer wearing women's clothes and living as women. [Covert or closet] homosexuals keep their activities hidden from the public, family and friends. They avoid associating publicly with known homosexuals and, in general, lead the life of a typical heterosexual'.

There are no private owned 'presses' in Vietnam with all publishing licenced by the Ministry of Culture and Information, *doi moi* has seen more news being reported in the press (Drummond and Thomas 2003) but the media still has a role in spreading propaganda and educating the people. In considering how Vietnamese state owned media portrays Vietnamese homosexual expression, homosexuality and gay men I show how they conflate these different ideas, expressions and identities with

¹⁰ I sat in on a peer educator selection interview for a similar project reported in this article and no women were interviewed.

transvestism as being an all encompassing persona coupled with pejorative imagery. This misrepresents the Western dichotomous model of homo/hetero/sexuality, neuters Western health workers use of MSM, confuses local men and denies the existences of a large number of men who see themselves as men that are sexually attracted to other men.

Recent research on HIV/AIDS and Homosexuality in Vietnam

Any discussion on recent research cannot commence without first acknowledging the work of Jacob Aronson (1999). Aronson's paper "Homosex in Hanoi? Sex, the Public Sphere, and Public sex" is known as one of the few ethnographic (in method) accounts on same-sex sex in Vietnam. It is based in Hanoi, commencing with his 1985 encounters around the notorious Hoan Kiem Lake. While his review of the literature is in-depth and covers authors across the range of different eras, including Borri 1811[1631]; Richard 1732; Philastre 1909; Matignon 1900, and numerous others, these sources predictably do not present a uniform understanding or lineal, developmental understanding of homosexual, same-sex sex or of men who love men in Vietnam. Rather, they contest each other's ideas and interpretations of what each author sees, believes or feels. It is not in the scope of this thesis to explore each in depth suffice to say that same-sex sex in Vietnam has been contested all along. Aronson's own experiences and encounters are limited numerically as well as geographically to the socio-public space of the footpath around Hoan Kiem Lake and its immediate environs. He shows that this immediate area is frequented by men in pursuit of men for sex, as did Jammes writing in 1898 for male prostitutes, and again Carrier (undated) describes more dubious encounters with men there. Taking Hoan Kiem Lake as a single ethnographic site is like focusing on the wall in Darlinghurst Sydney or Gray Street St Kilda. It is known by young men, gay or not, who are desperate for money as a place they can earn an income from other men looking for sex. At present, at least, this particular area in Hanoi should be viewed as a gay market place rather than a gay meeting place, and while it is important for addressing problems of health risk, drawing broader conclusions from it alone runs the risk of missing other arguable more significant groups of men. This problem is worth examining more closely in relation to other recent work.

Therefore, in this section I consider three separate research reports on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in Vietnam; Eve Maie Blanc 2005, Vu, Girault, Do, Colby and Tran 2008 and Ngo, Ross, Phan, Ratcliff, Thinh and Sherbourne 2009. Each of these reports relies on Western notions of sex and sexuality and label people accordingly to their sexual partners' sexual anatomy, while one of the reports attempts to mitigate these assumptions by ascribing sexual identity to research respondents as being 'self identified gay or homosexual men' (Vu, Girault, Do, Colby and Tran 2008). This is problematic because labelling men as being 'self identified gay men or homosexuals' does not, when we take a social constructionist viewpoint, address the realities of men having different understanding as to what these terms mean. Unlikely to be aware of the kinds of warnings made by Masten, Wu, Rupp or Halperin, these authors, while attempting to understand local language in applying the Western sexual binary, succumb to the use of Western sexual essentialism (Sweet 2000) to describe what is happening in the local context. Each of these cases demonstrate 'the strain of scholars (and researchers) trying to stretch Western concepts like "homosexual," "bisexual," ... to fit non western settings' (Sweet 2000 p 207).

The complexities and contradictions in sexual identities and sexual behaviour show the way sex is practised and understood varies greatly between cultures, and not forgetting *within* cultures. In addition to the studies already referred to there have been several earlier studies addressing HIV/AIDS and male same sex attracted men and their sexual behaviours in Vietnam, and many of these confirm the dire need of a 're-orientation' of strategies that reach out to MSM. St Pierre (1997) found the exclusion of MSM in surveillance and public health prevention efforts leads to the assumption that MSM are not part of the HIV epidemic in Vietnam. This finding is alarming in light of the subsequent work of Wilson and Cawthorne (1999), which established that MSM in Vietnam had multiple sex partners, low levels of condom use and poor knowledge about HIV transmission. Since then Colby's work (2003) has assessed levels of knowledge among MSM of the risk of infection while his 2004 report looks at the actual rates of infection (Colby 2004).

Vu, Girault, Do, Colby and Tran's report, 'Male sexuality in Vietnam: the Case of Male-to-Male Sex,' appeared in *Sexual Health Journal* published by the Australian

public scientific research body CSIRO in 2008. The major finding of this report is that ‘... sex between men exists and is associated with two common descriptions: *bóng lộ* for those who are feminised and in public and *bóng kín* for those who are not, and are often married’ (Vu et al 2008 p 83). (The shared term in both of these alternatives is *bóng*, a word meaning ‘shadow, silhouette, reflection, image’ and whose use in this context is, as far as I know, yet to be subject to historical analysis. While the semantic connotations are derisory, its use has to some extent been reclaimed.) The two descriptors are developed further in the report:

The present research revealed that there are two common labels used with pride to describe men who have sex with men: ‘*bóng lộ*’ and ‘*bóng kín*’. *Bóng lộ* refers to men who regularly wear women’s clothes, who have a feminine appearance, and present themselves as women (known as transgender in health-related documents). *Bóng kín* refers to men who regularly wear men’s clothing, who have masculine appearance, and who usually do not want to be identified as same-sex attracted men (Vu et al 2008 p 84).

The parallel between this list and that of real and fake appearing in the newspaper article discussed above is remarkable. The report posits *bóng lộ* and *bóng kín* as ‘preferred terms’ and then provides further terms that are considered ‘discriminatory and demeaning by MSM’ (Vu et al 2008 p.85) which I put into a corresponding table:

Pe-oe	Adopted from the French term <i>pede</i> or <i>pederaste</i>
Lady boy	English/Thai adopted term
<i>Xăng pha nhớt</i> or <i>Hai thì</i>	Gasoline with lubricant, two stroke-from the two-stroke motor. i.e. not real or full men
Hi-fi or <i>đa hệ</i>	Bisexual
<i>Đĩ đực</i>	Male prostitute

Ngo, Ross, Phan, Ratcliff, Thinh and Sherbourne’s research report titled, ‘Male Homosexual Identities, Relationships, and Practices Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in Vietnam: Implication for HIV Prevention,’ appeared in the *AIDS Education and Prevention Journal* in 2009. This study examines local identities, relationships and sexual practices of young men in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Expanding on the list of

vernacular terms compiled by Vu et al, they examine linguistic codes and attempt to establish linkages between sexual identity and sexual behaviour. Like Wilson and Crawthorne (1997) and Vu et al (2008) before them, these authors found the term MSM and its Vietnamese translation unhelpful and not commonly used by their respondents.

Their report also confirms *bóng lộ* and *bóng kín* as popular terms, but at the same time suggests for their research respondents that *đồng tính* - of the same sex - was the preferred term to denote a sexual identity. Their research respondents considered *bóng* as a pejorative term (Ngo et al 2009 p 254). This report continues:

They used *bóng kín* to refer to men who looked masculine and hid their homosexual activities; they also believed that many *bóng kín* were married and had children. *Bóng lộ* was used to describe men who presented themselves as women, and did not attempt to hide their homosexuality. In some cases, it was easy to mistake a *bóng lộ* for a woman...

Participants said that they can easily identify their *bóng kín* and *bóng lộ* peers, regardless of whether they dress as women, saying, "people of our world can easily recognize them as *bóng* because of their delicate gestures or manners"...They also believed that they could identify *bóng* by their soft voice or gentle handling of things: "The way they pick up a cup is so gentle. A normal man does not do it like that" (Ngo et al 2009 p255).

Marie-Eve Blanc's, research report titled 'Social Construction of Male Homosexualities in Vietnam. Some Keys to Understanding Discrimination and Implications for HIV Prevention Strategy' (2005) appeared in the *International Social Sciences Journal*. Blanc states Vietnamese 'male homosexualities are defined as the variety of same-sex behaviour among men (i.e., males who are socially and biologically identified by the whole group as male)' (2005 p 661).

Homosexuality does exist in Vietnam, as in every country of the sub-region of South-East Asia. Homosexuality in traditional Vietnamese society does seem very different from behaviour in Western countries (Blanc 2005 p.665).

Despite her attempts at being definitive, I am not completely sure what Blanc can mean by being identified as male 'by the whole group' in the present context. In my experience the notion of maleness is a complex issue for Vietnamese gay men. Most Vietnamese gay men I know tend to think that they are not 'real men'. For them real men fuck women. I wonder if one is meant to read and understand Blanc's report in terms of only straight acting¹¹ gay men or if the 'whole group' doing the identifying needs to be deconstructed. (Does it, for example, simply stand-in for state and/or research authorities?) In effect she applies the Eurocentric biomedical label of male homosexuality to the Vietnamese context, but only if the social group looks, thinks, acts and identify as male. It is also possible that she is confusing local vernacular and applying it across time and place which Halperin, Masten and Wu (among others) warn against. Blanc identifies *bóng* as a popular Vietnamese term to infer an 'effeminate person' and 'homosexual' (Blanc 2005 p. 665). However I believe Blanc miscalculates the importance of *bóng* as an identity and elevates it to a status it does not deserve; as a result, later research reports which cite her work rely on *bóng* as a classifier, where in fact they are perpetuating a false reality. Let me explain.

Vu et al and Ngo et al both published after Blanc, but all identify *bóng*, *bóng kín* or *bóng lộ* as vernacular terms which are significant for identity purposes, in one way or another. However, this attribution with its repeated iteration in research linking *bóng* with effeminate men or transgender and transvestites elevates Vietnamese transvestism to a status that in reality it does not have. Vietnam does not have a tradition of a third sex along the lines of that found in Thailand with *kathoey* or in India and the *hijra*. Blanc conflates other SE Asian transgender and feminised males such as *kothi* in India, *wandu* in Indonesia, *bantut* in the Philippines and applies them to Vietnam, thereby giving *bóng lộ* a prominence it does not deserve. I surmise that Blanc believes that Vietnamese transgender/transsexuals exist in the same number and in the minds of Vietnamese people as do Kathoey in Thailand. I will expand on this later in this chapter.

For Blanc, the major question is how homosexual identities are defined in Vietnam and in my view the jury is still out on this, but I can say from my own experience

¹¹ The equivalent descriptor used by Vietnamese men is manly or menly man

Vietnamese gay men do not systematise homosexuality for themselves in the way she has. My contention is that these authors misunderstand the use of *bóng* and its everyday use. By placing it as a local equivalent to homosexual as an identifier or label these authors misunderstand it and, for HIV/AIDS prevention purposes, place too high an importance upon it. For example, none of these authors question who is doing the labelling or the category defining? Which group has the privileged status of being final arbiter or giver of such labels? Surely whoever is doing the classifying is going to be doing so with their own purpose or aims in mind; and in much of the published research on Vietnamese men who have sex with men the act of classification, despite its appeal to words and terms that are indeed found in circulation, the dominant perspective is a decidedly “outside” one, and while it is dangerous to assume this is inevitable, that perspective operates through a process of othering the other. What health and development workers are learning in respect to HIV transmission and gay men is that identity makes no difference to actual infection, that is, it is the behaviour one partakes in, not the identity, that puts men at risk: men who insert their cocks into another’s anus without wearing a condom, irrespective of identity, are in a high risk category for infection, the passive or insertee partner more so. Identity is not the risk factor here, it is the behaviour. Yet, at the same time, many of the same health and development workers continue to stress that there is heightened risk of infection in light of a person’s homosexuality or their being MSM. It is the behaviour that places them at risk not their identity per se. It is having sex without a condom that is the risk factor. Identity really only becomes important for epidemiological purposes. I do recognise that men who identify in different ways may tend to exhibit different behaviours associated with particular identifications, but this too often clouds the central importance of behaviour. As previously mentioned *kathoey* and *hijra* are generally accepted as a third sex but in Vietnam there is no equivalent to either of these categories and those men that live as women or have had sex reassignment surgery¹² are generally looked down upon by the Vietnamese gay men that I know, and from my experience given that they are so rarely sighted in public their existence as a cohort or recognisable group must be questioned. I don’t deny that pre or post-

¹² The number of post operative transsexual in Vietnam must be viewed as nothing like that in Thailand for two essential reason: First, the cost for such surgery is huge and second, this type of procedure is not available in Vietnam

operative male-to-female transsexuals exist or have a social presence; I am simply arguing that any report that describes *bóng lộng* as a prominent social grouping in Vietnam is simply promoting an urban myth, or worse, promoting a wilful blindness on the part of the state and, as a consequence, the community.

Blanc (2005 p. 665) and Vu et al (2008 p.83) both lament that the problem is that many men who have sex with other men do not consider themselves homosexual. So what? Why is this a problem? And what is more, who is this a problem for? It is only a problem when applying Western notions of sex/uality in non-Western settings. Therefore, the problem once again is in trying to stretch Western sexual essentialism to cover, as at least hoped by Blanc, the multiple homosexualities she claims to exist in Vietnam with inappropriate terms. The real problem is accepting not all people around the world subscribe to Western frames of knowledge-making and therefore the need to classify sexual identity by sexual behaviour which triages people into one of only three available identity corrals of homosexual, heterosexual or bi-sexual thereby affixing an identity for life is an act of hegemony. As a form of Western hegemony this only relegates non-Western patterning of sex and sexuality to a position of inferiority and infers that the 'only way to "develop" a social response to the problem of HIV and AIDS is through adoption of Euro-American modes of sexual regulation and identification practices' (Gosine 2009 p31). In fact, understanding new ways to comprehend sexual identity and behaviour that are not dependent on Western understandings and that shift the emphasis from sexual identity to sexual behaviour may well have major implications for the way HIV/AIDS prevention and education material can become more effective across the board.

Ngo et al (2009) establish a taxonomy that for the first time lists the contemporary vernacular to describe the various male same-sex identities in Vietnam with a corresponding descriptor that goes beyond the Western binarism of homo/heterosexuality. As I have previously inferred, while well intentioned to find better means and points of access to these men, I am not sure that this taxonomy achieves what it is intended, beyond the possibly complacent assumption that toolkits based essentially on words (which we know mean nothing removed from context) are a reliable guide to behaviour. It proves nothing more than what exists in all locations,

and that is, there are a whole range of terms, labels and identities that are nuanced by participants and mediated by the particular social milieu which people are part of, with meanings and interpretations that vary widely across groups. Western vernacular includes a similar diversity in naming, labelling and describing homosexual identity and gay sex that varies depending on country or region but includes terms such as; queer, poofter, top, bottom, active, passive, shirt lifter, poo jabber, pansy, queen, dizzy queen, screaming queen, AC/DC, dandy, sissy, fagot, straight acting, girly, closeted, in the closet, out, open, bi or tri and, of course gay and homosexual just to list the more obvious terms. Some of this is essentially othering, some of it is reclaiming otherwise derisory terms and labels, and yet others are used as terms of identity. Yet, apart from acknowledging there is a global diversity in words and terms, knowing this vernacular in the Vietnamese context has done nothing to advance better HIV/AIDS health communication in the Vietnamese context, not least because no public HIV/AIDS campaign identifies sex as a mode of HIV transmission.

For me, Blanc's attempt to place her contemporary Vietnamese homosexualities in an evolutionary continuum where 'The Asian homosexual is typically an effeminate male...' (2005 p667) only extends an orientalist's view of contemporary male same-sexual behaviour in Vietnam and mistakenly links *bóng* to the Thai *kathoey* and the Indian *hijra* in an attempt to create a similar third sex in Vietnam and in doing so she fails to offer guidance in terms of what is actually happening on the ground. What is happening is far more complex with many more different aspects to consider than taxonomy.

I want to suggest that the contribution these research papers can make to existing knowledge on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in the Vietnamese context is limited. Firstly, by advancing Euro-American modes of sexual regulation, these three reports limit the effectiveness of their findings because, combined, all they achieve is to create a sexual taxonomy of identity labels using local vernacular that does not have wide currency among Vietnamese gay men. This vernacular is not widely understood and nor is it commonly agreed to by the different groups in these studies.¹³ Each of these

¹³ The following paragraph in Ngo et al's report I find curious: 'Before the fieldwork, the research team participated in a 5-day training session which covered crucial topics such as sexuality, local terminology related to sexuality used by MSM....' p84. A key component with

reports only contributes to an understanding of Vietnamese homosexuality because of the paucity of critical research on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in the Vietnamese context. Blanc is a difficult read, ranging across a very wide range of subject matter, but in the end it does bring together a disparate literature. And because of this and the inherent flaw propagating *bóng* as the primary sexual identifier, other researchers who draw upon this foundation for their own work risk promoting a false reality.¹⁴ Likewise, much of her contemporary data and analysis I find misleading when I compare it to my experiences of the men I have got to know, their passions and their relationships.

Vu et al (2009) contribute some interesting findings from their qualitative research because they highlight a demarcation between different male same-sex identities and practices in contemporary Vietnam. Ngo et al (2008) establish a taxonomy that for the first time lists the contemporary vernacular to describe the various male same sex identities in Vietnam with a corresponding descriptor that goes beyond the Western understandings of homo/heterosexuality, although as already pointed out I think there research methodology is flawed because of the need to train the researchers to understand the local vernacular, indicting a failure to recruit peer researchers in any meaningful sense of the term. These doubts extend to the most significant finding of their report, which relates to their research respondents' preference for the use of *đồng tính* - of the same-sex - rather than *bóng*, *bóng kín* or *bóng lộ* as sexual identity labels. As I have already stated I find the use of *bóng* as a classifier in homosexual identity making and identity marking unhelpful in the Vietnamese context, and not a label or identity that the many Vietnamese men I came in contact with applied themselves or to others. At the same time, I am still unsure what the preference for

using peers to conduct research and out-reach work is to recruit peers. That is like-for-like. Yet this report reveals that this is not what happened, because there should have been no need to cover local terminology related to sexuality used by MSM if there was a better match of peers. Another question I would raise is that Vietnamese people do not relate well to strangers who cannot establish a ready connection with either their home province, school or some other significant relationship. Being gay is not recognised as a nexus for such particularistic ties. Furthermore it is highly unlikely that research subjects would have volunteered a sexual identity without first being asked are you *bóng*, *bóng kín* or *bóng lộ*? Thus leading the participants to identify with a label already suggested rather than what they may perceive themselves to be.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that despite a thoroughgoing deconstruction of Sophie Volpp's dismissal of a homoerotic fashion in late-imperial China by Stevenson and Wu (2005), her work and its errors continue to inform much of the continued discussion of homoeroticism in Chinese history. It would seem that in areas that are cultural sensitive for the West it is difficult to dislodge misapprehensions, even (or especially?) where these originate in academic discussions.

đồng tính (same-sex) found in Ngo et al's study represents. I suspect if presented (in a survey) with a list of terms that are in the main offensive or stigmatising and asked to choose one then many men might opt for this clinical and seemingly neutral descriptor, but that choice may still not be a term they use themselves, and nor does it tell us much about their own sexual practices or relationships. However, what the findings do show is that sexual identity is still contestable, with no uniform agreement among MSM participants as to what is, or what could become, a Vietnamese gay Lingua Franca and there is certainly no common understanding of the wide use of different forms of vernacular.

In the rush to find answers to their research questions not much of any real value or substance is contributed to the understanding of gay, homosexual or male same-sex attracted men outside of their respective research subjects' cohort. By presenting these findings as being representative of all MSM in Vietnam, each of the studies fails to acknowledge a larger hidden population of MSM. For example, in Vu et al (2009) the 38 study participants are referred to as street-based.¹⁵ Street-based male sex work is confined to only a couple of streets in Ho Chi Minh City and is unorganised, while in Hanoi it is based around Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the centre of the city. Furthermore Hanoi's male street-based sex work has an element of organisation about it, with numerous accounts of extortion and rip-off scams involving bars (Carrier, undated private correspondence). Yet in their report they state it was street-based MSM who were recruited for the project and the balance of the MSM were recruited by snow-ball methods – friends of friends of friends. These methods limit the heterogeneous nature of their respondents. Had they included a broader enquiry base or different methods of recruiting their subjects to include the internet they would have located a large number of self identified male sex workers – callboys - in internet chat rooms and other relationships websites such as VietSingle which would have added breadth and depth to their research sample.

The great majority of Vietnamese men who have sex with men are not street based, transvestites or callboys. They are men who live with family or friends and use the internet to make contact with potential sexual partners, lovers and boyfriends.

¹⁵ Do they mean homeless, orphaned or sex workers?

While intermediaries, friends and all the other sites for meeting men exist, the great majority of men meet via the internet. To attempt to generalise the research findings of studies focused on specific sub-populations to the entire MSM population in HCMC in particular and Vietnam more broadly is to ignore how the more common patterning of same-sex encounters actually take place and the language and cultural semiotics employed to communicate both an identity and what it is to be gay or a same-sex attracted man. As with most gay men around the world, most Vietnamese same-sex attracted men, from my experience, are men attracted to other men; that is men as men, men that don't dress as women (other than drag or for fun); but men that for all intents and purposes are men, dress as men, act as men and are seen as men. These men seek their partners partially by what position they take in bed; active or passive; top or bottom. From my experience in Vietnam most gay men don't want to form platonic relationships or have sex with men who might prefer to be women, dress as women (as in transvestism), or call themselves women, nor with men who have had sex reassignment surgery. Gay men by and large want sex with other 'men'. By examining the words and terms used by Vietnamese men on relationship websites and chat rooms it becomes clear the popular terms used in that context give access to a world of meaning very different to that made available in the published research findings.

Internet based chat rooms and personals

VietSingle (www.vietsingle.com) is a large online social site that includes web based personal advertising. It is widely used by Vietnamese looking for friends, love and sex. This site has over 600 pages for male, female, gay or lesbian categories. Each page contains fifty private ads. The site is hosted outside of Vietnam. The sheer number of Vietnamese specific personals makes this site substantial in its scope and its importance in finding friends, lovers and sex partners not only in Vietnam but across the diaspora. There are one hundred and thirty pages of gay men's personals. At fifty per page, that equates to six thousand five hundred personals. I have visited VietSingle over eight years but the site has been in existence longer than that. It is probably the preeminent website for all Vietnamese, including gay men and lesbians,

searching for intimacy. Other gay specific sites include www.thegioithu3.com and www.boyvn.com but access to these sites is restricted to membership, whereas Vietsingle has open access to its site except for either placing or replying to an individual personal, when one is then required to register with a personal email address prior to being able to undertake those particular functions.

Beginning with my first unexpected experiences in Vietnam I have regularly used the chat-room function for VietSingle, known as Vietfun, as well as IRC chatrooms, depending upon which part of the country I was in. In these spaces people use nicknames or handles in a variety of ways. For men who are interested in meeting other men for erotic pleasure there are two obvious ways; to use a nick that indicated what they liked to do in bed, boybucuboy, boyuonmilk or, in expressing a preferred partner such as boylikeboy, boytimanh, boithichbantrai and boy25tmuonbf. The translation of the nicks provided here are as follows and in the same order as above; boysuckcockboy, boydrinkmilk, boylikeboy, boylookolder, boylikeboyfriend and boy25yearsoldwantboyfriend. However there was a third way in which men used nick names in the pursuit of men for sexual pleasure that included using a nick or handle that did not identify themselves as interested in men or sex. This included the use of innocuous or unassuming nick names like, Duy, Hoang, VuiVehomnay, and buon, just to provide a few. The first two are just male names, the next translate as happytoday and sad. To a lesser extent some men used gay in their nick name. However in relation to the other explicit nicks the numbers who used gay in their nick was and still is low. This surprised me. The use of boy in a nick name was far more popular than was the use of gay.

I found IRC chat software not as easy to use as Vietfun chat, however if IRC was operational and placed on a computer in an internet service, it provided better access to men in regional locations than did Vietfun. Vietfun was far more commonly used in HCMC, Danang, Hanoi and several other large provincial cities. Once initial contact was made with the required pleasantries being extended in either of these chat rooms, such as asking the person's name Ban ten gi?, age, ban bao nhieu tuoi or may tuoi? and usually your location, street or district, ban dang o dau hay duong/quan gi?, one or the other of the people chatting would ask for the other's Yahoo (messenger) nick.

Transferring your cyber chat to Yahoo Messenger had several advantages. First, it enabled chatters to see one-and-another if one or both PCs had webcams connected. This allowed people to put a face to the text relationship but it also provided the opportunity to see firsthand if the person you were chatting to was sexually appealing or not. And in relation to the many times I was chatting with men it allowed them the opportunity to confirm that I was what I said I was, that is a *nguoi nuoc ngoai* a foreigner. I participated in many internet chat conversations where people who couldn't see me would not believe I was not Vietnamese. Their doubts were not because my Vietnamese writing skills were impeccable, because they were most decidedly not, but it simply did not seem plausible to them that a foreigner would be able to speak, read and write Vietnamese, let alone would want to do so. On a number of occasions I was congratulated by men that I chatted to, young and old, because I did have these skills. In some instances I felt that these skills only added to my exotic allure. For many of the men whom I chatted with confirmation of my non Vietnamese identity led to a flurry of questions to establish my domestic living arrangements: Did I live in a room or a hotel *ban/Anh song o Phong hay khach san?*, who I lived with or did I live alone *ban/Anh song voi ai? Hay song mot minh?* This was then normally followed by was I married and did I have children *Anh co Vo Chua?* Or *Anh co con khong?* These questions became fairly predictable once it was established that I was who I said I was.

Transferring chat to Yahoo messenger provided additional advantages than did remaining on either of the other two chat platforms. While power supplies were fairly stable, internet connections were very unstable and could drop out at any time which left chatters being unable to reconnect with each other once the Internet connections had been restored. With Yahoo messenger once nick names have been accepted they were added to your personal chat list and should an Internet connection drop-out you could reconnect once you became reconnected to the internet without the need to search for that person. I did not have any one particular nick which I regularly used. In fact I used a number of different strategies to engage with potential sex partners. I never had any wish to develop a single relationship or romantic relationship because of the transient nature of my life. But also, using the internet was one way I could improve both my comprehension and written Vietnamese. These nicks varied, though I

cannot be sure how I discerned which to use. Sometimes I used gaybucu (gay suck cock), gayold, gayoldTOP, gayBOT, and very rarely I used gaynguoinuocngoai (gay foreigner)¹⁶. The success of these strategies varied depending on a number of differing factors. There were times where I had so many chat windows open that I had no way of keeping track of the conversations or what was being said to whom. This usually led to my chatting partner to demand an explanation from me as to my slowness and lack of attention to the conversation at hand, at other times I got bored waiting to chat with people and would leave the site or try a different site. Apart from my personal hooking up, these web-based sites opened a window to a huge number of gay men, their conversational language as well text based vernacular as they negotiated the identification of sexual partners without the least reference to *bóng*, *bóng kín* or *bóng lộ*.

Top and Bottom Vs *Bóng lộ* and *Bóng kín*

From the three reports which urge the use of *bóng* as an identity one could mistakenly believe that *bóng*, *bóng kín* or *bóng lộ* as the only way Vietnamese same sex attracted men categorise themselves by. However, this ignores a much larger group of men that do not use these terms. In all the time I have spent in chat rooms or when talking to my friends I have no memory of any man every using *bóng* in any discussions with me. In the previous paragraph I refer to a larger group of men I had contact with through the internet who use many other terms such as menly or manly men or, *ko eo lo ae* – not girly - to describe the person they are looking for. Often a personal ad will have - I am manly - *toi la manly* to describe oneself, or I look for manly – *toi tim manly*- however what is gaining broader currency are the gay-English language terms of top or bot (bottom) to indicate the sex role one takes. *Bóng*, *bóng lộ* or *bóng kín* are not commonly used. The use of *kín* by Vietnamese gay men is close to the Western term 'in the closet,' meaning "secret," and is used increasingly but it is never attached to the more pejorative *bóng*. Examples such as *gaykin*, *gkin* or *boykin* can be found in numerous personals. I found in Vietnamese personal ad and other gay sites these more popular terms and they are used by thousands of gay men.

¹⁶ I did not want rely to on status as a foreigner to be the sole point of interest to potential chat room buddies, but also I thought it unethical to trade on this status to make connections.

By using the internet it is possible to develop a better understanding around the hybridised use of English and Vietnamese words and terms that is better representative of contemporary and popular identity terms and expressions used to articulate male same-sex desire and attraction than what can be found in the literature. When on line but, also in personal advertising, Vietnamese same sex attracted men do not use *bóng-kin* or *bóng-lo* as an identity label or as a search filter as much contemporary research would suggest the case to be. In fact, my real-life face-to-face experiences with Vietnamese same-sex attracted men has shown that *bóng* as a term is not used at all by them. On-line it is so rarely used that it cannot be claimed as a contemporary identity category of any significance other than being used in the pejorative. In far more popular use are terms such as boy, kin, gay and *nam tinh*. Gay is used in personal advertising spaces as a category in the same way as male, female and lesbian are being used as options available to list your profile under. Furthermore, the Internet has provided boys and gay men interested in and desirous of other men the opportunity to fulfil sexual gratification and, to understand that their use of the term 'gay' will and can provide an avenue for sexual contact without the essentialising nature of the term in the Western context is worth further research.

Conclusion

A social constructivists' approach to sex/uality accommodates the various permutations of homo/sex/uality that are not uniformly played out in contexts which are different from those of the writer/researchers' experiences. However many researchers confessing such an approach are still bound to an essentialism in their findings because language binds them to write about what they see, witness or interpret from a Western standpoint of understanding sex and sexuality irrespective of how the people being written about think of what it is that they are doing. Much of the research, as a result, ends up contributing to the creation of stigma because of the limitation of English to accommodate difference. The academy demands labels and identities for sexual systemisation and contemporary English accommodates Western biomedical understandings to create the essentialising language.

Rather than using modern Western homosexual discourse to taxonomise or systematise past and present sexual identity labels as being definitive contemporary labels I have heeded the warnings of Halperin, Wu, and Masten, and have turned to examine the language Vietnamese same-sex attracted men use. My search is not of historical records; (none are available at present) but the search does take place in a contemporary space, cyberspace. Initially cyberspace provided access to thousands of men and the language they use to talk about themselves and sex without the need to alert them to the local vernacular. More direct interaction with men in Vietnam allowed me insights into how language and practice might be related.

The combination of academic studies focused on the term *bóng* and the local media's portrayal of homosexuality as transvestism ignores a larger group of same-sex attracted men. In the Thanh Niên newspaper article discussed above none of the imagery or text based stories resonated with any of my Vietnamese gay friends' experiences or with what they had shared with me as to it was like to be gay in Vietnam. None of my friends relate to the main two photographs. None of these gay men would expect to be friends with a transsexual or transvestite. They are circumspect as to whether they would seek friendships with overtly girly boys, either sexually or platonically. Each of my Vietnamese gay friends and sexual interlocutors would consider themselves to be manly men irrespective of what I thought them to be or what position they took in bed – top or bottom - wanting to be sexually or platonically involved with only 'men'. The notion of being associated with trannies or overtly girly boys as friends would be an anathema to them. When I reflected upon my friends and our shared experiences I conclude that the newspaper article contains nothing of any direct value. Such approaches will not help them become any more aware of the risks posed to them by having sex with another man. My friends could not see any representations of themselves in these photographs. None would relate to being gay and a transvestite as the state clearly insists they are. None of my friends would ever wear women's clothing, nor would they understand being identified along with other men as MSM, let alone understand that term or what it implies.

When they read or see such portrayals Vietnamese same-sex attracted men are only confused by any association of the images with themselves. I cannot claim to

know how they would have reflected upon these images in the contexts their own lives. However, I believe they would have dismissed them as strange, and even laugh, because these are not compatible with their lived experience. This is in part because they do not relate to the state's conflation of being gay and transvestism as one and the same, or that most homosexuals are fake where true homosexuals are limited in number and really want to be heterosexual. The distance between these images and the lives of men having sex with men is just too great.

This kind of mismatch places gay men in Ho Chi Minh City at risk of infection for the following reasons. First, same-sex attracted men do not know they are at risk of infection because they do not understand that the particular behaviours they enjoy put them at risk. Secondly, MSM has no meaning for them or for health professionals (as explained above, the problematic term here is the 'S', sex). Thirdly, before they notice that messages are supposed to be directed at them, as men engaging in risky behaviour, they can have little understanding of how the virus is spread. Fourthly, they have no idea that condom use can reduce the risks of infection. Fifthly, there is confusion around the link between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality because gayness and homosexuality are conflated with transvestism. Finally, because Vietnamese nomenclature is different from Western nomenclature when it comes to gay/ness and homo/sex/uality they both contribute to alienating Vietnamese men-who-have-sex-with-men from the most important information they need; effective HIV/AIDS prevention information. In the end, as I hope to demonstrate, these are not differences that can be overcome simply by 'better' translations and I urge health and development workers and, researchers in this area to resist the urge to schematise.

Chapter 3

Dramatis Personae¹⁷

Phước was twenty when we first met between Christmas day 2000 and New Year's Day 2001 in Hue. He is the first friend I made in Vietnam. I audaciously invited myself to Phước's home to meet his family where I was treated to a wonderful meal and hospitality that humbled me. He is an only child. His father fought against the Americans in the war and he met the revered General Võ Nguyên Giáp (b. 1911-)¹⁸, twice. In the back yard of his parents' home there are two unexploded bombs, swallowed by the mud in 1968. While Phước was finishing his Mechanical Engineering degree in Ho Chi Minh City he lived with distant relatives near the Saigon River Bridge. Just before I returned to Australia in 2003, Phước was shaking when he asked me why I was not married. I told him I was gay, and he responded with all sincerity, that he was sorry that I had this problem. Phước returned to Huế, got a job with a large employer and built a new home for his parents and new wife. He is the proud father of a baby girl. I was invited to his wedding, but sadly, I could not make it. While I have not seen Phước since before his wedding, we talk on the phone each time I have been in Vietnam.

Of course the list of characters in my story does not commence in Vietnam or with Phước. This journey of sexual awakening commence much earlier with fortuitous connections with like-minded men on similar journeys of sexual awakening to mine. These chance connections happened virtually, textually in cyberspace prior to real world face-to-face encounters. These are not chance meetings between men in the street who possess socially programmed and individually tuned gaydars that pick up the signals of the possibility of sex. Though the randomness of the connections may have been the same as for real life encounters, turning on my computer and

¹⁷ All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, locations have been altered and where possible, any traceable profession has been changed so as to protect the identity of individuals.

¹⁸ General Giap planned and executed the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and, later again was instrumental in the planning of the 1968 Tet offensive. General Giap is generally regarded by military historians as being the greatest general of the 20th Century.

connecting to a chat room in cyberspace provided multiple possibilities in a single outing, not unlike speed dating.

The principle character is me. I am the primary chronicler of the tales, documenting the twists and turns in the journey of disorientation of seeing and knowing, of seeing and not knowing, then of un-knowing - or is it undoing the already known - but always trying to orient myself in the twin unknowns of desire and destination. I was navigating the bumps and the curves of men and their bodies while navigating the unfolding journey, simultaneously. A journey of finding my way, leading to increased confidence and competence while discovering different subjectivities, of new friends, new dilemmas, new understandings and new challenges, a journey that starts with me and my keyboard. I had sold my business and retired from the blur of long work weeks. In the juggling of fulltime study and freelance property consultancy I became digitally connected to a new world, to new people and new experiences. I had begun my journey.

Savong was the first of my new cyber fuck buddies to come and stay with me in Melbourne. We meet in cyberspace over the Christmas period in 1999-2000. He asked me if he could come and stay for three weeks in January 2000. He was Khmer but had permanent residency status in New Zealand. He and his brother lived with their relatives. He got residency status on the basis that he was being reunited with their immediate family, but in fact they were his aunt and uncle not his mother and father. He thought Australia in general, and with me in particular, was where he wanted to have his first sexual experience with another man. Savong was enrolled at a University in NZ and was studying computer engineering. He was gifted intellectually, very funny to be around. However he was troubled by being gay. He wanted sex in Australia because he did not want his family to see him having sex with men. The first week in Australia he spent in my bed where we had sex morning and night. At the beginning of the second week he went to St Patrick's Cathedral and prayed to God seeking forgiveness. He promised he would never have sex with a man again. He moved to the study and slept on a spare mattress. I took him to the Melbourne Gay and Lesbian festival. He had a mild panic attack there because he was so scared that his family would become aware of his sexuality because his 'grandmother's ghost would tell them

where he had been'. The last online conversation I had with Savong was several years ago. At that time he was living with his boyfriend and was working in Sydney.

The next cast member to appear in my bed was Jon in September 2000. He was twenty-three and hailed from New York. We met online while both of us were using ICQ chatroom software. My nickname was gayaustralia. He contacted me first. We had been meeting online for a few weeks when he said that he was coming to Australia and wanted to know if I wanted to meet him and if so if he could stay with me a few days. I agreed. The 15 hour time difference between us worked well for phone calls. Jon would often call me at my work after he arrived home from his or the other way around. After he arrived in Australia he called me a number of times from Northern Queensland to change his plans. My university friends were intrigued by all the mystery and were excited for me. Between work and classes we managed five steamy days of sex. He had no interest in visiting any Melbourne tourist sites. He was a sex tourist and I was his quarry. On my way to a community development conference in Ho Chi Minh City in December 2000 I went to New York for a few days to see Jon. He had changed. We travelled for two weeks together where I experienced his wild mood swings, bullying and verbal abuse. It was a relief when we parted company and he returned to New York. We had email contact several times after that, however his inability to acknowledge his erratic and hostile behaviour ultimately led to my ending our friendship.

Following the nightmare with Jon, Omir was an oasis in the otherwise arid and emotionally drained state in which I arrived in Istanbul. He was an elixir. The unconditional love, care and attention he lavished on me nourished me and my depleted emotional wellbeing. He was twenty-three. Again using ICQ I had met him in cyberspace. We met online only two or three times before I left for New York and we made tentative arrangements, should I go to Istanbul, to stay with him and his family. He knew I was gay but I had, and still have, no idea if he is. His response to my asking him was, 'I've done it all. Everything there is to do I have done it'. Omir worked night shift for a security company but really wanted to study music production and management. He appeared to be inspired by my being a mature-aged student and reconsidered his aspiration from being ridiculous to considering it possible with my

encouragement. He was the youngest of three and his mother, who he adored, was widowed. My five days in Istanbul with Omir nurtured resilience and restored my energy as I was to enter a period of time and space with experiences leading to the most dramatic upheaval in my future plans and with my understandings of myself and who I may or may not have been. It was all about to change.

Next is Vũ. Between meeting Jon and Omir I searched online for ways to make contact with gay men in Vietnam. The result was via a Yahoo group, which I joined. I did not post a personal ad myself but responded to one, and only one. I have no memory of why I choose Vu or what parameters I put in place to narrow the field down. We corresponded only by email because the Vietnamese authorities firewall would not allow ICQ chat software to be downloaded. From what he said in emails and the humour he used I thought I had been again lucky in meeting this person. In one email he asked me how big my cock was. When I asked him the same question by return email he responded with 'enough to make you happy'. I laughed so much at his response. I only met Vĩ at the end of my first stay in Vietnam. We had fun and shared a lot of laughter and he wanted to know if I regretted not getting in touch with him earlier. When I returned to Vietnam eight months later I waited a couple of weeks to settle in before I made contact with him again. When I did he insisted that he had to come and visit me that day. I tried to put him off several times during the conversation only to find he wore my resistance down, so I relented and agreed for him to visit me. He came and we chatted for five minutes. That was the last I heard of him again. He never responded to any of my emails over the following eight months as to his whereabouts or his well being.

Thành is in his late thirty's. He likes to go by his English nom de plume – Mark; though I call him Thành. He accepts the western construction of gay sexuality (not "homosexuality"). He had served as the head waiter at a famous restaurant in HCMC. He owns a coffee shop where he works most nights. He is the youngest of nine children. His father has three wives, all of whom have borne him children. When we first met, Mark worked permanent night shift, now he works for a food importer. He 'entered the gay life' when he was twenty-seven. He is in a committed relationship with the same person (five years). Prior to his current relationship I had given up

trying to remember his ex-boy friends' names; he had had so many. We met through a web-based email group prior to my studying in Vietnam in 2001. Thành would become my lifeline in the early weeks of my stay in Ho Chi Minh City. He continues to play a significant role in my life in Vietnam and much of my socialising centres on him and his friends. We will often share our dreams for the future, sexual secrets and desires with each other. Luckily for us and our friendship we have very different tastes in men. When I am in Vietnam I am included in all of his extended family's celebrations.

Tommy is Thành's boyfriend. He is (selectively) openly gay, but not with his family. This year (2011) he is twenty-four. His family are well-off, but their wealth has come from dubious means. He is the youngest child in a blended family. While he has been Thành's boyfriend for five years, I only got to know him three years ago, because he was 'too shy to meet a foreigner'. He studied in Singapore for a few months before the college realised his previous education certificates were not genuine and he had to leave the country. A year later he worked for an international airline operating out of a different Asian country where he was based for one year. He was fourteen years old when he had his first boyfriend. All his friends are gay. He only likes movies that have happy or romantic endings.

Hai was my Vietnamese teacher. She is three years older than me and teaches English in the state education system. She will retire soon on a state pension of about \$40USD a month. To augment this, she has worked and saved for many years teaching Advanced English at night as well as Vietnamese to foreigners. She has three children. She has not seen or heard of her husband since he fled Vietnam in the mid 1980s. At that time she was pregnant with twins. Hai took me to my first Vietnamese wedding, first funeral, first funeral anniversary, and first Tết celebrations. Hai refers to herself as my mother's Vietnamese daughter and to my sister-in-law as her sister. Hai and one of my friends Vinh got on with each other really well but for some reason Hai and Lợi disliked each other, immensely.

Vinh is a tour guide specialising in outbound tours. He is in his early thirties. He takes tours from Vietnam to Australia, Spain, France, Italy, Holland, Belgium, the UK and Egypt and, other SE Asian destinations too. We have been friends since 2001. When we first met he had extremely limited English proficiency. We communicated

through dictionaries, handwritten notes and very carefully selected and slowly spoken English. He is the eldest of three and his family are from the 'countryside'. He uses no labels or terms to describe his sexuality. I feel deeply and emotionally attached to him. He calls me dad and I call him son. He has been in a seven year relationship with a man, but will never admit to it as such. Vinh was engaged and had plans to marry in 2010, but his father died, and he has now postponed it until a more auspicious date. His boyfriend Đức married in 2008: 'I did it for my mum'. I met Vinh at a local swimming pool in HCMC one hot Sunday afternoon. Vinh has become one of the most significant people in my life. I was unable to attend either his father's funeral or the 100 day anniversary of his death.

Đức is Vinh's long term boyfriend. He is two years older than Vinh. He is an area sales manager for a franchise chain. He is a health fanatic and is always exercising or playing tennis in his free time. His father and older brother live in the USA. He lives in HCMC with his mother. He is devoted to Vinh and loves him deeply. 'I'm a gay', Đức says and is gay in all senses of the Western construct. His father arranged for and paid a Vietnamese woman with American citizenship – *Việt kiều* - to marry Đức. It is planned that he will emigrate to the USA in the future, but he does not want to leave Vietnam. Đức and I often tease Vinh about 'gays' and talk dirty to the point where Vinh will retort with 'is that all you two can talk about'. He is so serious, and we roll around in laughter. The first time I met Đức and Vinh together was when we all went to see Vietnam's then most famous pop star, the very beautiful Mỹ Tâm at Em và Tôi cafe. Đức likes to go to a gay disco for 'special dancing'.

Lợi is 32. He and his wife are currently undertaking post-graduate study overseas. He has no sexual interest in men. He is the middle child of five boys. His family are poor and live in the Mekong Delta region. His wife is part of the Vietnamese business elite. He has lived in HCMC since he was 17. We have been friends since 2002. He is deeply concerned about social justice issues and the condition of street children and orphans in Vietnam. Our friendship developed over an extended period of time. We met in 2001 when I was using the computers in an internet shop he worked in to write two research reports. Recently he shocked me by telling my mother that meeting me had changed his life.

Hiếu is in his late twenties. We met while eating fried rice on the street in 2002 or 2003. I was alone, he with his older sister. They invited me to share their tiny table. He asked for my address and came to visit a few days later. We had a brief affair based on sex only. He met Thành and he became infatuated with him. However, that never went anywhere. He is a very funny person. He has had a couple of relationships over the years. Once, he and his boyfriend were seen naked together by his lover's sister – though nothing was ever said about this. However, because of the amount of shame Hiếu felt at being seen, the relationship ended soon after. His next boyfriend was a medical student. The two of them lived at the boyfriend's family home for two years. The boyfriend was always jealous of any contact Hiếu had with other men. During this relationship I had little contact with Hiếu, and what contact we did have was via email only. Hiếu is now studying overseas.

Cường is the training manager for a chain of Vietnamese clothing stores. We met online in Vietnam in 2004. He was twenty-two at the time and lived in a very pretty holiday location where I was to visit the following week. He had just graduated from university and he wanted his first sexual encounter. His family are from a central province. He is the only unmarried child and his family are very proud of his academic and workplace achievements. In 2004 and 2005 while I was in Vietnam he visited me a number of times; after that he ignored all attempts I made to keep in touch with him. Then late in 2007 he contacted me via Yahoo messenger. I saw him a number of times that year. He has only one gay friend and is actively looking for a 'husband'. His family are pressuring him to find a wife. He longs for the day that he can take his husband home to meet his family. In 2008 he was undertaking his second undergraduate degree. Since 2009 he has again stopped responding to any of my emails or text messages.

I met Trường when he sang out to me as I walked past him and his friends while they sat drinking coffee. They were at a small table at the entry to the *Tao Đàn* park near the Labour swimming pool in Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street, District One. He is the youngest of three children. His father is a commune leader and they own three properties side-by-side in Thủ Đức district. Truong invited me to his graduation, *tốt nghiệp*. After the ensuing beery celebrations with his class mates I asked him what I

could give him for a graduation present. He asked me to take him to a sauna and pay for a massage. We went and had a spa. I said that I had only enough money for one massage and that he should have it. Afterwards he proudly confided in me that the woman who massaged him also sucked his cock. He said it was the best graduation present he received. Two days later I told him I was gay. Initially he was stunned at this news. But later said, 'You are my brother, there is nothing that would concern me about what you told me'. Truong had a steamy one month affair with an Australian woman I introduced him to. He has a Vietnamese girlfriend and has invited me to his wedding in May 2011. His wife-to-be is very beautiful.

Each time I return to Vietnam I slip into a world parallel to that of my life outside of Vietnam. All my friendships have been developed independently of each other, that is with the exception of my friends' partners, with whom I do not socialise unless they are with their partners. My friends do not socialise with each other independently of me. However they all get on really well when together and enjoy each other's company. Initially this was not the case, and on the first one or two occasions people did come together, such as my birthday or Christmas, they were a bit standoffish with each other. However, over the years as they became better acquainted with one and another and understood the nature of what each friendship was and meant to me, they too began to enjoy each other's company. There is no overt play for my attention over anybody else's and there appears to be no overt jealousy. Nobody has ever tried to play me off against somebody else and nobody has ever attempted to make me feel guilty if I was to spend more time with one person than another. When there have been conflicting engagements my friends have accommodated this in one way or another. Often they will discuss between themselves what it is they may have individually planned for me and what is the best way to accommodate all these arrangements.

The usual routine is something like this. I spend the first and last night in Vietnam staying with Vinh in his room, that is if he is not on tour somewhere outside of Vietnam; Vinh will cook food for me, his brother (a policeman) and Đức. Between the first and last night I stay in Lợi's apartment. Within 24 hours of my arrival in Ho Chi Minh City my social life will have returned to what it was before I left on the previous

occasions. I slip into and out of this social life with more ease and with less hassle than I do with my life in Melbourne. Invitations for coffee, a late night meal, or weddings start soon after I switch my hand phone on.

While there can be no doubt that I rely upon my friends for my social life, it remains “my” life. I am free to accept or decline any invitations that I receive. I have never felt under any pressure to attend any function to which I did not want to go. In the main I accept most invitations, unless I am unwell, or a little pissed off for one reason or another. I believe my friends tolerate my mood swings much better than I may handle theirs. If I feel I have been omitted from something it is me who feels rejected and insecure, for no reason other than that being a character flaw of mine.

In this *dramatis personae* we have met the significant players in the story that is to unfold next. While I am the chronicler, maybe even the narrator, these people have become some of the most significant people in my life. I cannot imagine my life without them in it. Certainly in my journey of becoming, they have been instrumental in providing me the opportunity to make their acquaintance and offering me entry to a life and culture that I never dreamt possible or that I could have entered to the extent I have. “My” story exists because of these people and it coexists alongside theirs. Our friendships hang tightly together because there is something in each of us that the other needs or requires to grow and flourish as people. We have melded, a fusion has occurred that can never be undone; lives have been forever changed in ways and by means that cannot be explained. The obvious is there to be seen, tugged at, teased and cajoled, but there is the invisible, unseen, the thinking, the thoughtfulness, the feelings and the mechanics of our interactions. These are the binding agents that hold us together, bind us as strongly and as robustly as any mortar that binds the bricks that stand as buildings. The purpose of this story is to protect them, their trust in me, our lives and our friendship.

If we are to engage with the social, we have an obligation to our readers, our colleagues and ourselves to be clear why we are researching and writing about a particular topic, and to provide sufficient personal explanation to allow a reader to understand why certain biases and choices seem to emerge from the text.

Dennis Altman 2002b, p. 321

Chapter 4

Approaching the Orient: An Auto-ethnography

As Thai Airways flight number TG550 descended uneasily through the moisture-laden clouds, I could see in the distance vast fields of red muddy-water give way to small villages and hamlets. A minute for two later a swathe of rusty rooftops, crooked roads and ant-like figures scurrying along narrow lanes appeared below me. From a thousand feet in the air the unfolding scene underneath resembled a Cubist painting; ordered and disorderly. As we touched down the ant-like figures became human and the odd shapes and different colours gave way to lush green paddocks beside a runway where scythe-wielding men and women cut grass and motorbikes zoomed along on a road outside the airport perimeter fence.

As the aeroplane taxied to the Tân Sơn Nhất terminal its cabin filled with the same heat and humidity the people cutting the grass on the verge of the runway worked in. I was experiencing equal measures of excitement and anxiety on our bumpy ride. We passed a long line of concrete-domed structures, one after another, several groups of them positioned by the runway. Housed in these rows of cannelloni-like half-shells were mean looking aircraft, their military livery and blankets of camouflage netting gave up their disguise. Several other military aircraft, in various states of disrepair, cannibalised for their parts, were just a little further away. Our plane pulled up outside the terminal and we walked across the tarmac to collect our bags and clear customs.

My terrestrial travels mirrored my cyber connections. I had cyber buddies in New York, Istanbul and Ho Chi Minh City. While my personal carriage to these destinations was by traditional means, my emotional journey and connections to these people and their exotic lands was through the new and exciting technology of the Internet. As I cautiously tapped away on the keyboard of my computer constructing essays for my studies, simultaneously, excitedly I typed messages sending them into the mysterious

world of cyberspace like notes in a bottle not knowing who would find them. Internet chat rooms and gay websites connected me to people I later became better acquainted with. My cyber buddies and I had more in common than we did with the people we lived next to or socialised and shared our offices and class rooms with. Cyberspace was changing the way the world interacted and we were using new technologies to explore new possibilities for friendships, relationships, sex and knowledge that was not freely available or was denied to us. This was a journey combining the old with the new while recombining Western ideas and notions of sex with different understandings, creating new understandings of self and sexual identity. On this journey the latest of my new cyber buddies I was to meet lived in Ho Chi Minh City and, I had a community development conference to attend there too. I was going to travel the length of Vietnam before I returned to Australia.

Brimming with excitement and anticipation I had arrived in the country that was the real purpose of my journey. My mood swung between being scared of the uncertainty of what was to yet unfold and happiness in the certainty of knowing that what I was doing was so very different from anything I would have contemplated just few years earlier. What was I going to discover? What was Vietnam like? Would I get lost? How will I find my friends? I knew there were going to be several university friends going to the conference and I knew that I had to meet *Vũ*. I had made contact with him via a web-based bulletin board, a Vietnamese gay men's personal advertising site, before leaving a month earlier. However, considering the events of the previous month, I was not too sure when I wanted to meet him. I had a week or so to go before the conference started and nearly three weeks after it in which I wanted to see as much of this country as I could before my thirty-day visa expired.

As a country, Vietnam was an enigma to me. As a fourteen year old in 1971, I did not know what to make of it. My family were lifelong Labor Party voters and vehemently against Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam and my father was adamant that should my older brother get conscripted he would not go to Vietnam. He said he would hide him in the desert if it came to it. As an adult, my feeling of ambivalence continued. On the one hand it was the only country in the 20th century to have comprehensively humiliated the United States of America militarily and I admired

it just for that. On the other hand it was a country that became more mysterious after its reunification. From 1975 onwards, Australia received waves of Vietnamese 'boat people' seeking asylum. At the time, and for a long time afterwards, the debate in the media and in the broader Australian society was in two parts; it was either universal acceptance of these people as refugees, or the contestation of the legitimacy of their status as refugees. The then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser welcomed the boats that had arrived on our shores and accepted their human cargo as refugees, refugees fleeing repression and the evil communists. Many asserted at the time that Vietnamese refugees were in fact not political refugees, but instead economic refugees seeking a safe haven for their cash and gold. Either way the "yellow peril" was invading.

What sticks in my mind about the Vietnam War more than anything else, however, was the experience of a neighbour, a family friend. He was a year older than my eldest sister and he enlisted in the Australian army to fight in Vietnam. After he returned home from his tour of duty he seemed to me to be never the same again; was he despondent or was he depressed? I don't know. But certainly he was not the same happy and easy-going person that my family had known. Over the ensuing years his life spiralled downwards into alcoholism and divorce. The second vivid memory is of the moratorium marches in Melbourne and the television coverage that they attracted.

The moratorium marches coincided with stories retold by my wildly sophisticated twin cousins, nine years older than me, of running safe houses for conscientious objectors and ferrying them across town, always one step ahead of the police. At the time these conscientious objectors were portrayed as villains by the police, but feted as heroes by the student movement and many in the community. My cousins themselves were at risk of being caught and jailed. It was either Chris returning home from fighting the yellow peril as a broken man at 20, or the fabulous stories of bravery and displays of political resistance and civil disobedience as portrayed by Mary and Maureen. It is these memories I have when I think of that period in time.

Yet, on that bright sunny spring November morning in 2000, when I picked up my round-the-world ticket from the travel agent in North Melbourne, I had no idea Vietnam would become the focus of the next stage of my study or that it would also

become a major part of me and my family's life. I had a month to travel before I arrived in Vietnam and another month in Vietnam before I returned to Melbourne. The focus of my study had been on HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) prevention and education in the broad context of community development practice and the implications of this disease for the most vulnerable in poor communities, and my plan had always been to return to Zimbabwe. I had no idea that the adventure yet to unfold would lead to such a deep and meaningful attachment to a different country and its people. The notion that I would spend the next part of my life wanting to research HIV/AIDS in Vietnam for a group of men that I had become deeply attached to would have been like reading it in tarot cards; unbelievable. Yet, that is what was to happen.

The reporting of a strange and deadly disease in the early 1980s in the USA soon became initially known as GRID – gay-related immune disease - because it was only gay or homosexual men that were the defining feature of this illness. By the mid 1980s when it became clear that gay men were not the only group presenting with the strange illnesses, GRID had evolved to become AIDS. HIV/AIDS was emerging as a new and wildly scary disease. In fact it was incendiary. As a tinder-dry bush is to a firebug, HIV/AIDS was to bigots and the ignorant. It was used to further marginalise and discriminate against people already marginalised and discriminated against, which usually meant those least protected by the law. Even though the HIV virus was also found in injecting drug users and haemophiliacs in Australia, as in the rest of the developed western world, HIV/AIDS was seen as a *gay* disease and gay men were blamed for it.

Any advances gay men had achieved toward recognition and acceptance by the broader community was for a time lost with the ensuing wave of vitriol, gay bashings, fear mongering, discrimination and abuse that followed GRID. This abandonment of community support was not only for those gay men who were HIV positive and remained otherwise healthy, but also for those men who became sick with one of the range of illnesses that their immune systems, in normal circumstances, could deal with but now had failed them. These illnesses later became known as AIDS-defining illnesses. These men were not only ill but bore the brunt of their illness as walking

skeletons or men with their skin cruelly tattooed by Kaposi Sarcoma and they became easy targets for discrimination.

In Melbourne during this time the only evening newspaper, *The Herald* (no longer published), had been running a series of articles on life in the city for and about gay men, documenting how with their newly found acceptance into the broader community had created a range of spaces where they could express their sexuality and freedom in safety. One of the places featured in these articles was *Steam Works*, a gay sauna in Latrobe Street. (Part of a mosaic in my head is an image of a man, naked, except for wearing a loin cloth, leaning up against a wall at Steam Works. However I am not sure if it was an image associated with the article in *The Herald*, or an image conjured up from one of the few times I had gone there.) With the hysteria the new “gay disease” was creating, the series was cancelled after two or three instalments and the crowded passages of the sauna emptied.

What has this got to do with my wanting to work in HIV/AIDS in developing countries? Maybe it was witnessing the furore that had surrounded GRID and later AIDS, or reading the accounts and following the lives of those being discriminated against that had had an effect on me? Maybe, because at this very time it coincided with my own exploration of my sexuality, and the public outcry that surround GRID was all negative. I am not sure, but at that time it was years before anybody could have known what a human catastrophe AIDS was to become. Furthermore, I did not know any person who was HIV positive, or who had an AIDS-defining illness. But how would I know anybody? I did not know any gay men. No person that I knew was gay, that is not until somebody I worked with told me he was, and that was when I was 30. Of course there were high profile deaths like Stuart Challender – the Australian conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra – Rock Hudson, Liberace and Robert Mapplethorpe. Later, Peter Allen and Freddy Mercury added to the growing list of celebrity deaths, all of them receiving many column centimetres of press coverage raking over their closeted sex lives. But there were many more men in the community who died from the effects of AIDS, mostly anonymously and never known to people reading the headlines.

Like a mosaic, the picture was just taking shape for me. Along with 10,000 other people I had been to the candlelight vigils held in Melbourne and the unveiling of the AIDS quilt at the Exhibition Buildings. Paul Monette's trilogy of autobiographies, which are some of the best writings of first-hand experiences of early days of HIV and AIDS told the anguish at the loss of two partners to AIDS and that of his own life living with HIV. I was sickened by the treatment meted out to a little girl, Eve Van Grafhorst from Newcastle, who was barred from attending her local kindergarten for being HIV positive. Her family was so harassed by the community and the press in Australia they fled to New Zealand for anonymity and acceptance. Reports from the UK told of health professionals refusing to treat HIV positive men there and, I was saddened to read, the many stories of men whose parents and families had abandoned them because they were HIV positive. Accounts of abandonment at a time when family is needed most in any person's life are shocking, but in a time of fear and prejudice they heightened my sensitivities to the issues. However, for me, the first true realisation of the ramifications of this epidemic was one sunny afternoon on a bus in Zimbabwe.

In Harare I had seen a street where a row of small carpenters' workshops were making coffins. Side-by-side, shanty workshops emitted a clanging cacophony of sawing and nailing. Coffins were being made by the hundreds. Workshop-after-workshop, it was a production line of coffin building. While in Zimbabwe I had also seen several buses used as mourning cars. They were not small ten seater buses, but forty-eight seater or bigger full with mourners with the names of the deceased painted by an unsteady hand onto white cotton banners draped along the sides of these buses. Then late one sunny afternoon somewhere between Gweru and Harare I was in a bus returning from Bulawayo and saw a number of trucks bearing the livery of Dove's Funeral Services pass in the opposite direction. The cargo displayed was easily identifiable because they hung out of their allotted carriage places, like toes hanging over the end of a mattress that is too short for its occupant. Coffins six to a truck, on their way to satisfy demand in the market place of death and misery, a market that was growing in size and number. Deaths by AIDS, or as Zimbabweans were calling it, slim disease. It was there on the bus that afternoon that I came to comprehend the cold hard reality of the global AIDS epidemic juxtaposed by the beauty of the refracted autumn sunlight enveloping the tobacco fields on both sides of the highway. Heading

north to Harare, I decided I wanted to work in Zimbabwe and HIV/AIDS was the area I wanted to work in and know more about.

I was full with an after-glow of success in that I could travel without an itinerary and come back alive, even-though on my last day in Zimbabwe I was mugged by six big burly black men, one holding a pen knife at my belly and four others stripping me of everything I possessed, only leaving my clothes and boots. I headed off to Thailand the following year, partly because British Airways had included a return trip from Melbourne to Bangkok as a component of the ticket I purchased to go the UK and Zimbabwe, and partly for erotic reasons. Later in that year, 1999, I made application to commence a degree in community development. As there was a summer school unit being offered prior to the full course commencing in 2000, I enrolled in it. During my first year my course coordinator told me that if I was to attend the community development conference in Vietnam at the end of the year I would receive credit points towards my degree. I needed no more encouragement to say yes, I'd go.

East-West-East

Leaving Melbourne on the 15 November 2000 my first stop was New York to meet a man I had met on the Internet. Jon was his name. I'd met Jon via ICQ chat. This internet chat room software was the craze at the turn of the millennium. I was using a nickname that was geographically specific and identified me as gay, when he contacted me. After a period of some weeks meeting on line he said that he was coming to Australia and could he come and stay with me for a few days. Why not? The logistics of this were yet to be worked out. How do I explain the visitor to family should the need arise? How am I to manage my work and study program? Yet the real issue for me was in dealing with the feeling that I was a desperado using the internet to fulfil sexual and emotional needs that I was unable to fulfil in real life. But then, it worked in January when Savong came from New Zealand for two weeks so why not, again, now?

September came and went, and so did Jon. He stayed for five steamy days where I am sure he never saw daylight; and I managed the logistics with ease and at the same time shared the experience with some close friends who neither judged me nor

thought I was crazy. However, that sharing did not extend to my family or work colleagues. Leading up to Jon's arrival meant managing time zones, cultural differences and steamy phone calls both at home and work, but it was surprisingly easy, and fun with my friends' vicarious interest. They too shared in this cyber/real world adventure. While I'd long known that I was going to go to the conference in Vietnam, I'd only decided to include NY in the journey because of Jon. Then he suggested that he'd take leave and we could go to Ireland and Greece together, before I went to Vietnam. What a good idea!

Romance and sex were two things that had been denied to me at home but were mysteriously available in an exotic location. This was both strangely private and secret at the same time. While never questioning my particular sexual expression, I have never been happy with claiming gay as the single feature of my identity nor have I ever proclaimed it as badge of honour. To be invisible and not draw attention to myself was the *modus operandi* I had become most comfortable with to survive an unhappy adolescence. So this was the way I learned to live my post family-home life, too.

Whether I was in denial or being homophobic, I don't know but I learnt not to attract attention to myself. But then again, why should I belong to a sub-culture? I'd never known anybody that had to apologise for being heterosexual, seeking approval for a lifestyle that was natural for them. And, yet at the same time I never knew anybody who had the same feelings for men that I had. Yes, of course there was a boy at school who had told another that he loved him - and wow what a fracas that caused in a very hetero environment. Poor Peter. Though I am not sure that I was all that sympathetic towards him at the time, because he was not like me - but I did think he had good taste for I too had had feelings for the same boy. You see Peter was a sissy, a bit "suss" and of course I was not: well at least at the time I didn't think I was, but in hindsight there was no doubt in some people's eyes I was too. In 1974, as sixteen year olds, we just did not have the vocabulary, experience or maturity to explain what was happening hormonally or emotionally to us.

Sex and romance for me became synonymous with travel. It was not always a comfortable experience, and on our travels through Europe I had to navigate Jon's increasingly (and unexplained) erratic behaviour. It was a relief when it came time for

him to return to New York. I was also glad I had made tentative arrangements to stay with Omer in Istanbul for the following week. I found it fascinating that I could live in my home and street for seven years, meet my neighbours very irregularly, never share coffee with them in either their homes or mine, yet be digitally connected to a network of newly established cyber friends whom I felt better acquainted with and connected to: New Zealand, New York, Istanbul, Ho Chi Minh City. It was meeting Savong and Jon on the Internet and having them stay with me in Melbourne that eventually gave me the confidence to go to Istanbul; though I knew nothing of Omer's particular sexual proclivities... other than knowing he knew about mine. While I don't accept gay as the only identity that defines me I have recourse to use it as short hand to explain to some people what it is that we may have in common. In cyberspace there is little immediate danger in this - certainly not the same danger that can be experienced, either real or perceived in adopting the same strategy and use of labels to signify identity in real world time face-to-face encounters.

I had only communicated with Omer three or four times on ICQ, and that was in the week or so before I left Melbourne. We had not spoken on the telephone nor had we exchanged photographs of ourselves. None of the mystery worried me, it was strangely exciting. Not in a sexual manner (though it had crossed my mind), but in sensing all manner of possibilities and experiences. I was just not sure what to expect, happy to go with the flow. Athens I'd been to before. In 1983 it was a hot and polluted city with so much intrigue attached to it. This time it was a-buzz with Olympic fervour. The underground had just opened. Where tourists climbed once before, the Parthenon was now railed off. I had forgotten how magical the walk to the ancient site was, with historic ruins in every direction you turned. Istanbul, on the other hand, was new to me. I had never been there. I only ever dreamed of old Constantinople and the mythology that surrounds the ANZACs. Friends had raved about the Grand Bazaar, hamams and Turkish pizza. They had extolled the beauty of Aga Sophia and the Blue Mosque. I knew that this experience was going to be different from that of Athens. And it was.

My time in Istanbul was hectic. The long list of city sights I wanted to see was nothing compared to what Omer wanted me to experience. I could not have had a

better guide to this wonderful city, nor could I have had a better entree to a culture that I knew little of and a religion I was completely ignorant about. Leaving myself open to the possibilities and risks associated with the unknown I left Turkey a richer person, experiencing and overcoming boundaries I never knew I had. In particular, Omer showed me that men can be friends in an intimate but still non-sexual manner. He slept on my shoulder while travelling on long bus trips; we walked the city arm-in-arm and he showed me off to his extended family as you would a prized possession. This challenged my sense of male intimacy of either being distant, removed, non-physical and devoid of feeling or to that of wanting sex with every handsome and alluring man that walked passed me. The only time Omer needed to be seen separate from me was when we walked down the street where his aunt, uncle and cousins lived. After we left their home and turned the corner out of their street he returned to the crook of my arm as deliberately as he had felt it two hours earlier. I was starting to get a sense that it was possible to develop male friendships that are both emotionally and physically close, but not sexual, that are not dependent upon displays of bravado or overt masculinity. It appeared to me that men could develop friendships with other men that seemed similar to those of women's friendships with other women that I had seen but never fully understood. I was beginning to see anew the reality of my own culture's limitations, and particularly its masculinist anxieties.

Vietnam 2000

Returning to Athens from Istanbul for my connecting flight to Bangkok I felt happy, confused, emotionally drained and weary. The flight to Bangkok was an emotional journey, the lights had been dimmed inside the cabin and I reclined my seat to doze or hopefully more to find sleep. But my mind was fitful as I was trying make-sense of the previous month's events. It was the first stretch of emotional time I had to consider the blazing row I had with my brother the night I departed for New York; another in long line of them over my life, all irrational but all nasty on his part.

I found I had tears running down my cheeks. Luckily for me I did not have anybody sitting next to me, and what was initially a trickle became a stream and then a torrent. I have no idea how long this went on for except that when it was over my

chest was wet and my throat was sore. What a mess I was in. While the month of travelling had been an emotional rollercoaster - confronting yet rewarded with positive and reaffirming experiences - it was this argument that I had with my brother that triggered the tears. It was here on the plane that I was hit by the realisation that he was treating me the same way my father had done all of my life. I don't know what it was that I'd done to either of them, but at that moment in the plane I realised that neither of them liked me, and never had, and I was heart-broken with grief with this realisation.

I arrived in Thailand emotionally and mentally exhausted. I was in a knot of grief over something that I felt helpless to retrieve. These family relationships were central to my well being and to the person I was, but they were so deeply fractured they affected every aspect of my life, and at a sub conscious level most probably affected most decisions I had made about my life and, I felt alone. This realisation preoccupied my thinking during my week in Thailand, little else mattered. Maybe I had a yearning for acceptance; acceptance by the two most important male figures in my life that was not forthcoming, and worse still it may never have been available to me from the very beginning. With these feelings of rejection I continued on my journey to Vietnam, and I am now in no doubt they influenced how I responded to the great sense of welcome I found there.

After spending a week in Thailand I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City on Flight TG550. While I had been on the road for only one month I arrived in Vietnam feeling that a whole year had passed me by since leaving Melbourne. I had no idea where I was going to stay but with a tonne of baggage I was ready to foist myself upon the waiting throng of arm waving Vietnamese outside the terminal. They were there to offer their services to the tired and weary souls who knew no better and the taxi tout who accosted me as I slumped through the terminal doors whisked me off to the city. The drive into town was a tale in itself. I had no idea just how far the airport was from town. In Bangkok we sped to the city on a freeway, but in HCMC we crawled along a narrow road in a sea of motorbikes weaving through the line of taxis heading in the same direction. From the back seat the traffic ahead resembled a conga line or gigantic python slithering into the distance in slow motion. It was rhythmic and purposeful at

the same time, hypnotic. From time to time I was jolted back to reality as the taxi swerved to miss crazy motorbike riders cheating death as they nipped in front of us. I was slightly shaken by the time the taxi driver deposited me at a small family-run hotel in the backpacker area that would become my home base for the next month.

The taxi driver and the hotel porter, young and slight, lugged my bags up the three flights of stairs to my room. At \$10 US a night, the room included a bathroom and an air conditioner; I did not think that I had done too badly.¹⁹ I had to deposit my passport, together with my yellow currency declaration form, with the manager. Also, I had heard numerous stories of people losing money and belongings from their rooms so I left my cash and travellers cheques with him too. In the early 2000s there were still no ATMs in HCMC. However the idea of having my possessions placed in a safe or vault of some description escaped the manager's notion of a 'duty of care'. My valuables were placed in a large manila envelope where I signed my name across the tape that sealed it, and then watched as it was stuffed into an unlocked drawer in the desk-cum-bar in the foyer of the hotel... open to the street.

It was hot and humid, and I was ill prepared in walking boots and socks. This district of HCMC was a-buzz with tourists of all colours, shapes and ages. I suffer from a form of mental paralysis in relation to directions and self navigation when I arrive in any new city, and on top of that I was hot and tired and I still felt bruised by the realisation of my family situation, so that first day I slept, ate and did my email all within a few metres of my hotel. While walking around this small touristy area my senses were being randomly assaulted by bird song, loud noises, bicycle bells, exhaust fumes, fragrant spices, air horns, beggars of every description, café touts, motorcycle taxis –*xe ôm*, and cyclo drivers calling out 'Hello sir, where you from? I take you to see war crimes, I take you to palace, I am cheap one dollar one hour'. I was soon to discover the worst thing to do was to enter into a conversation with anybody hawking their wares, services or begging, because in the end you will buy something from some poor wretched soul, even if you did not want what it was you had paid for.

My Lonely Planet guide did not have much on gay life in Vietnam but it did mention a café around the corner from my hotel in De Tam Street as a place some local gay

¹⁹ The four nights in NYC cost the same as my one month in Vietnam.

men hang out. Other than that, it said that as men often travelled together, it would be hard to know who was or was not gay and as long as no overt physical contact was displayed it seemed a pretty tolerant country. Girls and boys pashing would attract more attention than two men holding hands. In fact I was quite surprised at how freely Vietnamese men showed affection toward each other and how sensually Vietnamese women dressed.

Labourers wear their work clothes loosely, but office workers, and all Vietnamese when wearing casual clothes, both men and women, wear their clothes skin tight, showing every contour of their bodies; more so than in Thailand; more so than Australia. This sensuousness of dress is even more pronounced with displays of femininity in women wearing the ubiquitous *áo dài*. Anybody familiar with stock images of Vietnamese culture would be aware of the *áo dài*. A twentieth-century interpretation of traditional Vietnamese women's wear. Made from Vietnamese silk and comprising a pair of trousers with a fitted body length 'gown' of the same material and colour or contrasting colour and texture that free falls, split on each side from the waist to the ground like a wafer encasing the lower body.

The following morning when I went out from my hotel to eat I was nabbed by a cyclo driver wanting to take me around for the day; I dismissed him with 'I'll see you later', and walked around the corner. No sooner had I sat down in a café than a man wandered in armed with a selection of newspaper from around the world. These papers were no more than a day or two old. Wow, how he managed to get them was beyond me. His routine must have been well rehearsed: 'You want Time? – No. 'You want Bangkok Post?' – No. 'Where you from?' – Australia. 'I have paper from there, you want I have?' I was impressed, but he only had the Sydney Morning Herald. I bought it and proceeded to catch up on events from home.

Breakfast finished I was not many metres away from the café when another cyclo approached me from behind, and I heard the familiar refrain, 'Hello, where you from?' Caught off guard, I said Australia. 'I have many friend from Australia,' he told me as he dismounted and walked along side me, pleading with me to look at his well-worn book of past client recommendation. He then asked me what city I was from and pointed to somebody's message from Melbourne saying what a wonderful time they had had with

him. Finally, I agreed to hire him and go on 'his' city tour. It is all a bit of a jumble but I remember going to the War Remnants museum. One visit is enough for that! Seeing the Vietnam War from the Vietnamese perspective, which they call the American War, is sobering. I saw a temple, the main post office and Notre Dame Cathedral and several other sites. I still had no idea where I was or where anything that I had seen was in relation to where I was staying or where I was going.

Returning to the hotel, I paid the cyclo man his money and we happily went our different ways. However not more than three or four metres from where I was decanted I was accosted by another cyclo man, and for some stupid reason I agreed to go see something that I had not seen with my previous peddy cab man. Maybe it was the allure of having a massage (because that is always their final enticement; you want massar, nice girl - boom boom) but I was tired and sore. He took me to see something, it may have been the Chinese pagoda in District Five and afterwards I did have a massage. I was wary beforehand that I was going to be taken to a brothel of some description and not wanting to be put in that position I stressed that I wanted a male masseur- 'man massar not lady massar' I stressed.

We arrived at some building with stairs from the street to a room with three or four massage tables and curtains dividing the space; it appeared to be legit; and it was. I received a good strong massage by a strong male masseur for just a few dollars. However when the peddy cab man dropped me back near my hotel an almighty row erupted between the two of us over the amount of money he wanted. I was shocked by his tactics and even more shocked by my reaction. I poked his chest with my index finger and snarled 'Don't you ever come near me again', then I gave him most, but not all of what he wanted and retreated to a café for a cold beer, which in HCMC is a glass of warm beer with a block of ice in it. Drinking the beer cooled me down and settled my nerves. Sitting outside observing this busy intersection I started to consider what my role was in the events that were taking place around me here and how I made the decisions I did. I tried to view the act playing out before me both as a participant while at the same time sitting in the stalls viewing what was unfolding, as on a stage. Why did I respond to one beggar differently from another? What was it that triggered the opening of my wallet or my heart to one person's plight and not another's? Was I

being generous and kind or simply being benevolent with my actions only contributing to the existing system of patriarchy? Did the presence of white bodies here exacerbate the plight of the needy or did it relieve it in some manner? Being privileged in so many more ways than these people were not, did I make their lives better or worse? Was my life better or worse for being there? How do I explain my wealth and Western values of asset accumulation when these people had very little? I would leave these people in this country to their misery and return to my life of privilege and excess. This reflexive exercise became a pattern in understanding the changes that were taking place in me, and that I felt I had little control over.

Finding My Feet

Still experiencing “navigational paralysis” and constant disorientation the next day I again stayed close to the hotel. Eating locally and going to bed early, I started to read one of several photocopied novels I had bought the night before from a woman who walked the streets with a stack of books so high she could not see over. I also chatted with the family who owned the hotel; that is, both the bricks and mortar and, the business as they were extremely friendly towards me. I guess they were to all their guests. But in that part of town I was not sure that too many people stay for a month at a time. And still I had no desire to make contact with Vu.

Soaking up Vietnam meant more than just walking around what had become familiar, and that was not much. It also required me to reflect on the differences in what I was familiar with and what I had expected. As for the familiar, I compared it to Bangkok, a big city that I have little interest in. Bangkok is a huge city and to me un-navigable which in turn means unknowable and in turn inhospitable. But that is only to do with the fact I cannot find my way around the city and nothing to do with the city's inhabitants. It is a city I cannot orientate myself in: no matter how much I try or how many times I go there I can never orientate myself. But sex is on offer in many parts of the city, particularly Patpong... along with cheap jeans and ripped off designer watches. It was all ever-present and in your face. “You want girl, beautiful lady,” is the chant of the tout, day or night. And of-course gay sex is easy to procure, but less in your face than it is with the girls with shop fronts with huge neon signs such as Pussy

Girl and Golden Cock. Lonely Planet lists it all. Yet in Vietnam it is all different, an hour by plane away and it is all so very different.

To start with, in Saigon there is only one backpacker area - referred to by local Vietnamese as *Phạm Ngũ Lão* - in contrast to Bangkok, which has many different tourist and backpacker areas. The *Phạm Ngũ Lão* area in 2000 was a small piece of Saigon several kilometres from the centre of the city, but within an easy walk to or from downtown. De Tam Street was at that time the central street in the backpacker area where most of the cafés and tour operators were located. Here Internet shops were, and still are, located either in basements, or in first floor rooms above cafes and restaurants. On one corner at the T-intersection of De Tam Street and Pham Ngu Lao Streets was an old café-cum-bar, open to the street. In 2000 American and Australian Vietnam war veterans sat for hours drinking and whiling away their day. Now it is a bright and shining three level fast food outlet. On the opposite corner was a bar with bamboo sidings.²⁰ On most nights I could be assured of seeing some Western male tourist, bloodied and bruised, being ejected from its doors. Running parallel to Pham Ngu Lao Street but at the other end of De Tam Street is Tran Hung Dao Street. A major tree-lined boulevard funnelling an endless flow of motor bikes to and from District One and *Chợ Lớn* (lit. market big) – Districts Five and beyond.

Running parallel between Pham Ngu Lao and Tran Hung Dao streets Bui Vien Street creates a four way intersection with De Tam Street. Located in Bui Vien Street are any number of small hotels, tailors, souvenir shops, shops selling boot-leg CDs and DVDs, and workshops with highly skilled artists turning out copies of famous paintings. Everybody walked on the road, there was no space to walk on the footpaths due to parked motorbikes and bicycles, street vendors, hotel staff sitting on seats and cyclos and motorcycle taxis *xe ôm* – Honda hug - and other roadside squatters rendering the footpaths unusable.

In Buu Vien Street but on the eastern side of De Tam Street and running parallel to it are two small lanes or *hẻm*. Each of these two lanes run from Bui Vien Street to

²⁰ At the time of submitting this thesis the bright shining fast food outlet was replaced with the bar Alabouz bar taking up residence, and the bar had been transformed into another Highlands Coffee shop.

Pham Ngu Lau Street where some fantastic cafés and guest houses are located. In 2000 these two lanes were unmade, dusty when dry and muddy when wet. On the corner of one of these lanes was a small structure with a dirt floor. It was better built than a lean-to, but not so well built to be a formal building. The frame was clad with timber palings. There was only a door to the structure, which was open all day and for most of the evening. The family that resided here, I was sure, did so either illegally or because somebody must have paid somebody to turn a blind eye. This was my first close up encounter with poverty. The begging around here was relentless but that did not seem to bother me, maybe due to the way this family touched me.

On each of the four corners of the intersection of Bui Vien Street and De Tam street was located a bar, CD shop, chemist and souvenir cum guest house. In the section of De Tam Street south between Bui Vien Street to Tran Hung Dao Street - about one hundred metres in length - several more traditional Vietnamese coffee shops operated. With rows of low slung deck chairs facing the street, two at a time facing a small table where Vietnamese and foreigners alike can sit for hours over one iced coffee and endless green tea, listening to music or watching TV. It was while sitting here one night drinking a beer that I began to see the Vietnamese sex industry at work. It was not a sight of touts, or doormen enticing you into their establishments of tits and bums as in Bangkok. Here beautiful young women served coffee or beer and sat and talked to single men. For me it was; Where you from? You have wife? Where your girlfriend? I was polite, but because I am shy and I am not comfortable with this type of conversation, I left and went to the bar on the corner. But in leaving there, it appeared that I had disappointed the waitress because she asked me, 'Why you leave, you no like me'? She was beautiful with a single shiny plait that fell the entire length of her back, and all I could think about was the poverty or circumstances behind why she was there and that no doubt her beauty would lead to her being violated that night for just a few dollars.

At the next bar I sat outside. I saw, again, a number of predominately young men, some older, riding bicycles around the streets playing something in their hands that resembled a castanet. I had noticed these men the first night I was here but paid no attention to them. They appeared just after sunset at six o'clock and rode around until

about ten o'clock. At ten o'clock, hotels pull down their roller doors, cyclo men sleep in the seat of their peddy cabs, Honda Om riders sleep awkwardly on their motorbikes, and street sweepers come out to clear away the day's detritus while the streets funnel tourists to their hotels. For a number of days this little procession intrigued me. I asked my uni friends what they thought these guys were doing or calling for, but they did not know. So finally, one night, on my way back to my hotel from the community development conference I walked up to one of these men and asked what it was they were doing. *Massa!*, massage. So now I knew, and I walked away with a wry smile thinking how naive could I have been.

The following night after the day's conference proceedings I walked back to my hotel. It was late and I had had a few beers with some of the conference participants at a hotel in central Saigon. Still intrigued by these massage men on bicycles ringing their castanets I asked one in my street how much for a massage and he stuck up six fingers. I said yes. The massage man led off down the laneway just down from my hotel to a small single storey house where an old Vietnamese woman let us in and showed us through to the back of the house where there was a room with a bed and a separate shower.

During the previous day I had wandered down this laneway – *hẻm* - that crossed Bui Vien street. It was narrow which made passage of two-way traffic difficult, yet this lane serviced two entire blocks of housing and some guest houses - *Nhà khách*. Most of the buildings down this lane were single storey, only occasionally interrupted with newer buildings containing several levels. The older buildings were timber and some others were concrete with extensions and upper level add-ons. The newer buildings were concrete rendered brick, containing a ground floor and three upper levels. Most of these dwellings were residential homes and guest houses. Wandering along this laneway in the day I could see all forms of life and livelihood being played out in the full view of everybody else, with the exception of the most private of personal behaviours. Grandparents' still wearing light pyjama-like clothing wandered about, preschool children playing in the street, other people taking a meal, some hanging their washing across the lane while some others washed their hair or plucked white hair from the scalp of somebody sitting on a low stool. One of these houses was

decorated with colourful flags and bunting, the five coloured flags of Buddhism. A small altar was at the front of the home with a number of people milling around it. As I approached it I could see these people were dressed in white. When I was near to it the people paid little attention to my inquisitive behaviour and I could see there was a gold coloured coffin inside; they were mourning the dead person in the open decorative box. It was in one of these old wooden houses that I had been shown to a backroom with my masseur.

I was dying to take a leak and did so, and because I was sweaty and felt grimy I had a shower too. By the time I returned the massage guy had stripped down to his jeans and had opened a brief case that housed an array of glass cups and other odds and ends; another penny dropped! I had been seeing lots of Vietnamese men and some women walking around with perfectly round bruises and circle marks on their shoulders and backs. I pointed to these cups and indicated by shaking my head and my hands that I didn't understand as I had had hands and heads shaken by Vietnamese when they had not understood me. He lifted one cup out of the box and with a candle demonstrated how they worked on my back. It was these glass suction cups that caused the bruising. Stripped off to my boxer shorts I laid on the bed, wondering what sort of massage this was going to be for six dollars. But I was also thinking what if a fire breaks out in here? Assuming there was no back door to escape out of I would be fried alive as I'd have no idea how to find my way back to the front door. After about thirty minutes he gave me a hand job and I sucked his cock. With more questions on my mind than answers I again showered, dressed and left the room, only to be bailed up by the old woman who let us in the door, asking me in perfect English to pay \$10 US dollars for the use of the room. Luckily I had the money on me. I gave it to her and said with genuine respect 'You smart women' and she said 'Thank you. No you smart man'. The only smart thing I did was not to argue with her.

Going Further

A few days later I bought a bus ticket to Hanoi. This open ticket cost just eighteen dollars allowing me to get on and get off at a number of predetermined stops. My route took me from Saigon – Dalat - Nha Trang - Hoi An - Hue and on to Hanoi. I

purchased a separate Vietnam Airline flight to return to Saigon. Dalat is an old town that is renowned for its beautiful buildings in the French colonial architectural tradition with wide open public spaces and the air there was cool. It was quite a contrast compared to Saigon. In the evening the locals wore woolly hats, jackets and scarves. Even though it was cool I was not cold. The bus deposited us at a guest house. The room I had was huge. It contained two three quarter size double beds housed in shells of motor cars made out of chip board and painted white. The bed linen was synthetic and hot pink in colour. The large windows made my room light and bright and a door opened out to a tiny balcony. In the bathroom was a huge bath, a shower and a toilet. For some reason I felt gloomy, maybe even depressed, so I filled the bath with what little tepid water I could extract from the hot water heater and sulked in it until I started to shiver, then I got out, got dressed, went out and, as usual, got lost.

The following day the bus left early for Nha Trang. The journey there was both arduous and exhilarating. A bus built to carry people no taller than about 5' 6" is not a comfortable place for someone 6' 2" tall, but the views coming down the mountains were beautiful. Several times the bus stopped on the way and the passengers had to run-the-gauntlet through throngs of people selling cold water, coke and chips or kids wanting coins, just to get to see the view or go to the toilet or both. Arriving mid-afternoon in Nha Trang we checked into a hotel across the road from the beach.

This hotel was in an excellent spot. After I found my room I went for a walk along the beach front. It had to be about four kilometres in length, if not more, and the hotel appeared to be located at the mid-point. I walked about two kilometre of it along a wide concrete footpath. There were a number of cafes and restaurants dotted along the length of the path. At the northern end of the beach was a large flat paved area with trees and seats where a lot of people were playing, walking and sitting, and on the beach was a group of local lads playing football/soccer. For young men the national obsession is playing soccer in the afternoons and evenings. In the early morning just before sunrise that obsession is badminton. Halfway along this stretch of path was a police station.

That evening again I went for a walk along the beach to see what was happening. I passed a guy on the footpath; he made eye contact with me as we passed. He held

my gaze for that moment longer than was required; yep, I reckoned he was gay. He walked off into the bushes. I ignored him and kept going. On my return he came onto the footpath again and smiled at me. He said to me to go with him. I followed for a bit. I felt nervous; anyway he said that he wanted to have sex with me. I said to him that I had no money and that I would not pay him. I had read on a web site about this happening on the beach front here, so being wised up I took neither money nor my hotel key. However, he said that he did not want money and it was ok. Not sure what to believe I followed him into the shrubbery. So what happened, happened.

Walking back to the road, to return to the hotel, this same person came from nowhere and started to hassle me for money, shouting “give me money”. I was stunned by this, but this time I kept my cool and kept walking, but not to my hotel because I did not want him to see where that was, but I made my way in the direction of the police station. Each time I looked back he was still coming in my direction gesticulating. He stopped when he saw that I was talking to the police. He had no idea what I was talking to them about. In fact I had decided that I would just go up to the police and say hello and shake a couple of their hands and pretend that I could understand what they were talking about and I pointed towards the direction of where my hotel was. My would-be shake-down merchant quickly departed the scene. Sheepishly, I returned to my room where I spent the night reading and swatting mosquitoes, not daring to go out again.

The next morning I decided I would spend another night in Nha Trang and see what else was around, but also I would keep away from the part of the beach where the previous night’s encounter had taken place. Not knowing my way around I kept close to the hotel during the day. Late in the afternoon I walked up the beach to the spot where I had watched the soccer match the afternoon before. I sat on the brick wall observing the guys play soccer and the comings and goings of the locals. The women hawking their wares on the street met under the shade of a tree and exchanged money between them. Whether this was repaying loans, settling up the day’s slate or giving money to a head woman, I had no idea. But I was surprised by the congeniality and purpose of the transaction that was taking place. It was obvious that the women were exhausted. It could be read on their faces and from their

mannerisms. They had lugged their wares in two baskets balanced on the ends of a long flat board that rested over their shoulders all day long. These women don't walk with this contraption. Once they are balanced and on the move they go at a slow trot, with the baskets bouncing on the ends of the springboard. Christ, what toil and hardship. I never saw men carrying any load in the same manner.

A few moments later I hopped down from the fence and walked further along to a seat and sat to look at the ocean. Only a moment or two had passed when a young man in his late teens or early twenties got off his bicycle and came over to me. He wanted to practise his English. Like the two hundredth person before him he was ever so polite and courteous. However, this time it was only one person making the request, the previous English speaking practice I had done had been with groups. He had two loose cigarettes in his hand and he offered me one. Before I had time to think I accepted his kindness and we chatted and smoked. Once we finished he thanked me and said he had to get to his night school English class. After he left I felt guilty for accepting his cigarette. This was a small gesture of kindness but probably an expensive purchase for him. I went back and sat on the wall to watch the sweaty soccer players finish up their match. They dispersed but two remained behind and started to talk to me in what little English they had. After a short time they asked me if I would invite them to drink coffee. I was intrigued by this request. One of the men explained to me that they could not invite me to drink coffee with them because they had no money, and if they invited me they must pay, but if I was to invite them they could come and drink coffee with me, and I would pay. I was impressed with this form of social etiquette.²¹

With the three of us on the back of a motor bike, we went in search for a coffee shop. They told me they would go a different way because they were worried about the police fining them for having three people on one bike. I had no idea how to get there, but it was polite of them to tell me, in fact I thought it was more than politeness. It demonstrated some act of trust and openness. The coffee shop was large

²¹ In fact this was an early cultural lesson and it allowed me to negotiate a number of intercultural engagements without causing embarrassment. In later years if I was to be in a mixed group of people where another foreigner insisted in only paying for their own share of the bill my Vietnamese friends thought this very odd.

and air-conditioned. I had not been in one like this before. I was to learn later that these coffee shops form the basis of much of Vietnamese socialising. The Vietnamese social lubricant is coffee, not alcohol. We crowded into a corner of the café's air-conditioned room upstairs. The music was loud. The young men knew a lot of the people there. One of the guys left and said he was going home but would be back soon. About 30 minutes later he returned and told his friend that his mother wanted him so he left and the other stayed. I was becoming bored. There is only so much you can talk about with limited English on the one hand and even less Vietnamese on the other. However, after about an hour, the second guy returned and we again went out. They both had showered and changed from their sweaty shorts and singlets to neat casual clothes. This time they wanted to go and sing karaoke. Not sure about how much this was going to cost me I said that I had only a little money left and showed them how much I had. No problem that would be fine they assured me. I had no idea where I was being taken to. One of the men said to his sister's house. She had karaoke. We went along narrow lanes and around ninety degree corners twisting and turning. I had no choice but to trust my new friends in what they were doing and where they were taking me. It was all an adventure.

By this time my *gaydar* was starting to tune in to what was happening around me, and I was wondering if these two guys were in fact gay. Because it seemed to me to be odd that it was taking such a long time to find his sister's house; a wrong turn here, a strange stop to seek directions there. Anyway, finally we arrived. It was not a family home with a karaoke set up in a lounge room but a house with a number of rooms with Karaoke equipment. These rooms were for hire. The music went on and the boys started singing and cold drinks were brought into the room. One of my new friends drew the curtain closed and locked the door. The room was sparingly set out. There was a three seater settee where the three of us sat, a coffee table in front of the settee and the Karaoke equipment was housed in a cabinet against the opposite wall. There was a large calendar on the wall. Alongside official looking certificates framed on another wall was a photograph of an old man. My friends were having a good time singing to the tunes they had chosen which were mostly Vietnamese but also included ABBA. I could not bring myself to sing no matter how much encouragement I received from the other two. The younger of the two was right into it and sang and grooved to

the tune as if he was the real thing, while the other guy sat right next to me and he put his hand on my leg. Still not sure what to make of this I wondered what to do, so I kissed him. He responded without hesitation and amazingly his friend ignored the passion that was on display only a metre away from him.

This smooching went on for a while. I put my hand into his crouch but he brushed it away. So while he wanted to kiss he was not keen to take it further. However he was keen to get his hands into my pockets. This, I found really odd. For one thing, two men kissing for me meant only one thing but also because of how obvious it was that he had his hands in my pocket- this was nothing like a pickpocket's light touch. I only had the key to my hotel room in one pocket. My other pocket was empty because when I showed them, earlier, how much money I had, I gave it all to them. Partly because I wanted them to think that I trusted them and partly for them to know that I had no more money on me. However, he was not looking to fondle my genitals either; I think it was money he was looking for.

A little time later the gyrating Elvis had stopped singing and gave the microphone to my kissing buddy only to ask me to fuck him. Wow, no way. I had no idea if he was over eighteen or not, I had no condoms and, thirdly, I was not sexually attracted to him. And somewhere in the back of my head I was starting to wonder if this might had been a set up. But I let that thought fade out. I wanted to trust these guys, not fear them. If I feared them I could not think clearly, and anyway, they would sense it, plus I needed them to get me back to the hotel. And if they meant me no harm then that would be disrespectful to them. Amazing how much goes through your head in only few moments. The kisser kept singing while Elvis kept pleading with me to fuck him. Telling him that I had no condoms was of no concern to him. To my surprise he started to get undressed. The kisser ignored this, or pretended not to notice. Finally I managed to convince Elvis to keep his clothes on and that I would not fuck him and that I needed to return to the hotel to meet some friends. A small lie, but it worked, and they took me back.

Later that evening I walked around the corner to an internet shop to do my email, and became the target of a cyclo driver who wanted to take me around Nha Trang: No thank you. Taking advice from my Lonely Planet guide I said 'Not today, tomorrow',

thinking that would do the trick, but no he said 'You say that yesterday, you promise yesterday you go with me today': surely he had mistaken me for somebody else because I did not remember having a conversation like this in Nha Trang! This conversation went on all the way to the internet shop. He must have waited for me outside the Internet cafe because when I left there he peddled his cyclo very slowly and continued to badger me all the way back to the hotel. Knowing that I was leaving the following morning for Hoi An, I promised to go with him in the morning. Gosh, I did it again; I lied to get out of an uncomfortable situation. While I was in the internet shop doing my email I had noticed a Vietnamese guy sitting across from me. He had turned around a few times to look at me. I could see that he was in a local Internet chat room though not what he was typing. Not long after this he started to talk to me. My gaydar went mental. He's gay I thought. I got the usual questions; name, age, married and where are you from? He asked me if I had been to the disco in Nha Trang, to which I replied that I had not. So he invited me. I agreed to meet him on the corner near my hotel at eight pm and he would take me there.

The disco was located on the foreshore at the southern end of the beach. It took a long time to walk there. Upon entering I had to fork out the entry fee for me and my chaperone who assured me that we would get a drink on entry. Once inside we each got a beer and then he slid off into the mix and I was left at the bar to observe the comings and goings. Not sure what to make of the situation I wandered about. Toàn came and got me to dance with him and some of his friends. It was fun dancing to local and international pop music, but I was self conscious of my presence here. There were a couple of other Caucasian males at the bar. Both of them were with youngish looking Vietnamese women. For me, being so tall, so white, so bald and grooving my eighty kilogram body amongst the dancing throng half my size I felt like a whale in a sea of minnows.

I had to buy the next beer for Toàn and myself as the freebies had run out at the first beer. Pissed off with my feelings of ineptness and Toàn's expert tactics of getting me to the bar and then drinking beer at my expense I decided to leave, without telling Toàn, and walk back to the hotel. However I was only one hundred metres up the road when Toàn came running after me wanting to know where I was going. I told him I

was tired and that I needed to be up in the morning to catch the bus to Hoi An. His concern for me was genuine. He said that I could not walk back on my own because it was dangerous and that I should come back to the disco with him. When I declined he said ok, and told me to wait for a minute where I was. He returned a few minutes later with a motorbike he'd borrowed to take me back to my hotel. Any negative feelings I had had about the situation and of being used evaporated with this act of concern and kindness.

You do gay with me

The following day it took seventeen long slow hours to get to Hoi An where we arrived at midnight. The hotel was over-booked and at the last minute guests were being ferried to different hotels. There was no food to eat, and people were exhausted. I had read so much about this beautiful town; its history, the architecture and value for money clothing, that I decided I would stay three nights, or two full days. I could have two nights at my hotel and would have to move to another for the third night. The hotel was Hiltonesque, with great rooms and an in-ground heated pool in the centre of the building. My first morning here I spent having breakfast at the hotel and studying a map of Hoi An. I knew I would get lost, that was a given, however it seemed, at least on paper, to be any easy city to navigate with the streets being laid-out in a grid. The river was at one end, the hotel at the other with several streets running parallel to both, the famous Japanese bridge to the north and a road at the south leading to a bridge crossing a river. Boldly I set out to walk a square around the town. This would build my confidence and allow me to orientate myself.

I found my way to the southernmost intersection that I had identified before I had set out. Turning right here would take me to the river and a bridge where I would again turn right and follow the river to the northern point where I wanted to turn right again and then I should find myself back near the hotel; that was the plan. I found the river and the bridge, where I took some of photos of the foundations and walls of what could have been old houses that had been demolished. Finding myself this far and not getting bamboozled, and with the morning being bright and sunny I began to relax. As I turned right I could see a street market in the distance. I had walked not more than

one hundred metres toward the market when directly in my path was a young man wearing faded jeans and a tee shirt, wheeling a bicycle. As I went to move around him he moved to block my path and spoke to me in not-bad English:

D. Hello

P. Hello

D. What your name?

P. Phillip

D. Where you from?

P. Australia

D. How old are you?

P. 43

D. Are you married?

P. No

D. Why you not married?

(I hesitated here and thought because his English was so good I would test him out).

P. Why do you think that I am not married?

(To which he responded without hesitation...)

D. You do gay with me?

P. (I laughed) What?

D. You do gay with me?

P. How old are you?

D. Twenty-five.

P. No you're not, how old are you?

D. Yes, I am twenty-five, and I am lawyer

P. (I laughed) No you're not, how old are you?

D. Twenty-three.

P. No.

D. Ok I am twenty-one, you do gay with me, I want you do gay with me, now.

P. No you're not, you're not twenty-one and I cannot do gay with you.

After this rapid fire questioning I walked on, but he turned his bike around and followed me. I told him that he needed to go, but he kept saying no, 'You do gay with me, please'. I did not get angry with him because I found this conversation humorous and fascinating. I said to him that unless he told me his real age I could not talk to him. He then said he was 20. Still I did not believe him and walked on but he followed. We chatted for a bit about other things and where I had been and where I was going. He asked me if I was going to buy some clothes and I said that I was. His sister was a tailor and he wanted me to meet her, which I agreed to. Her shop was only a few metres from my hotel. There were maybe six or eight little tailors in this general area all decked out with bolts of fabric of every description; wool, cotton, real silk (Vietnamese and imported), and other synthetic fabrics too. The shop floor was tiled but no more than two metres by four metres. This woman who was his sister (though upon reflection I doubt if she was his familial sister) was friendly towards me and accommodating to my ideas for clothes. I chose some cotton fabric to have two short sleeve shirts made and some heavier cotton in a grey stripe for a lined jacket and trousers. They were so trendy, and maybe a little gay by my standards. We agreed on the price and I paid a deposit and she said that my order would be ready later in the day. With this I thanked her profusely and left. At last, I was on my own.

Now that I had orientated myself around this intersection, I was feeling good about continuing to expand on my new navigational bearings, and at the same time I was thoroughly bemused by the events of the last hour. I had trouble believing that I had been part of that earlier conversation, and both amused and curious at a new turn of phrase – ‘You do gay with me.’ This time I headed directly west. Earlier that morning I must have passed the shop as I headed south. Now, I had walked no more than one hundred metres down this street when I heard my name being called. It was Duy, the boy from the market cum shop-assistant. Now without his bike, when he caught up to me he started again, You do gay with me? Please you do gay with me! I walked into a small café and he sat down across from me. God, I could not believe how persistent this kid was. He was not rude, nor did he ask me for money. But he was so determined. I ordered a banana pancake and coffee.

While waiting for the food and then eating, I extracted from him that he was eighteen and he was in his final year at school and he hoped to go to Ho Chi Minh City to study law. So, finally after two hours of being followed around by a lost puppy yapping at my heels I relented and agreed to ‘do gay’ with him, but not in my hotel. That, I thought, would be the end of it. We went back out to the street and walked around for a while when he decided that we were going to sing karaoke. Thinking back to Nha Trang, I wondered if this was how sex happens here. Duy led me down the side of a two storey building across the road from his sister’s shop where he spoke to somebody; we went up a spiral staircase and along a hall. We entered a room at the front of the building. With music blaring, the door closed but not locked, we sat and kissed. As I had no condoms or KY with me ‘doing gay’ did not include fucking. In fact we did gay again that afternoon when he delivered the clothes I had ordered to the hotel, and the following day when he delivered the jacket and trousers that were not ready the day before. This included being naked together, mutual masturbation and oral sex, he did not ask me to fuck him or for him to fuck me. He seemed quite happy with the range of bodily contact that we had at each encounter. This was an amazing few days; I had so much to think through. There was so much that was different from my own cultural experience which included the confident manner in which Duy pursued sexual contact with me and by comparison my total lack of confidence at that age. But,

equally, I was intrigued by his use of gay not as an identity for himself or me, but as something that you did – ‘You do gay with me’.

Two years later I returned to Hoi An to join my niece, who was backpacking in Vietnam. After having an evening meal, she wanted to return to the hotel to read but as it was still early I said that I would just walk around and soak up the night atmosphere. I went into a couple of galleries and had a cup of coffee. While I walked around, the same motorbike cruised by a couple of times. On the third occasion, one of the two men on it spoke to me. After a short conversation I was invited to ride with them. It was very clear that the older guy was gay – he was so girly - but I did not know if the younger man was. They decided they would sing karaoke if I wanted to go with them. Why not, by now I knew how to read these signs. They found a new house amongst a row of similar homes on the outskirts of the town and rattled on the locked door where an older man led us to a room upstairs. After an appropriate time had passed the owner left us to sing. The younger guy went to the bathroom and stayed there and the older very queeny gay guy wanted to have sex with me. I was somewhat reluctant to because I was not attracted to him. He did not take no for an answer and persisted with touching me and trying to kiss me. I relented and I did let him fuck me between my thighs because I did not want to kiss him; for me this was not a very erotic encounter. I am fairly sure that he had surmised that had I had had sex with his friend first I would not have had sex with him: which was probably right. When I went to the bathroom to clean myself up, the younger man was there playing with his erection. I fellated him and he gave me a hand job, after which we left. We would not have been there for any longer than twenty minutes and the owner seemed a little surprised at the brevity of our visit.

It seemed to me that the erotic encounters I had participated in to-date, while random and at times situational and impetuously executed, were nevertheless undertaken by men clearly willing to, and sometimes persistently wanting to take part in them. It was their knowledge of their community and the availability of private spaces that allowed for the actual physical sexual encounter to take place. These negotiations took place in public spaces - out in the open, not behind closed doors. While these erotic encounters did take place in privately owned spaces, behind closed

doors, they nevertheless happened under a community gaze, all within a space of acceptance – that is, acceptance in the Vietnamese context is of a particular “person”, and an abstract category such as “homosexuality” doesn’t appear to warrant much attention - rather than a culture of silence, rejection or repulsion. It seemed to me Vietnamese society accorded an enormous amount of privacy to its people to go about and do what was private. Within reason, it seemed that as long as one did not go about drawing undue attention upon one’s actions or behaviour that nearly any relationship was possible and permissible, within reason.

It seemed strange in a communist country where the state controls most aspects of a person’s life that Vietnamese men had developed an enormous amount of freedom within a loosened space to pursue sexual encounters that in ‘freer’ countries where such freedom is taken for granted and should provide the opportunity to act with the same spontaneity, such as Australia, could still feel cramped and uneasy. It was ironic that this collectivist community exerted less community control over these sexual encounters and freer societies exerted greater community control and regulation.

Hue and Hanoi

Following the ‘you do gay with me’ episode I left Hoi An for Hue. The bus arrived in Hue mid-afternoon at a hotel close to the Perfume River. Those of us staying there were shown to our rooms. Mine was outside of the main building and at the back of the hotel. It was peaceful, but upon entering it I was mobbed by thousands of mosquitoes. I got the hotel receptionist to spray the room full of poison. That did the trick, and while waiting for the mosquito spray to disperse I had a wander about the town, on foot. Hoi An was certainly beautiful, but there was something majestic about Hue. The boulevards on either side of the river were tree lined and wide. The banks of the river housed numerous cafes and eating places. That afternoon I found a group of little rickety shop fronts where I got what little hair I possessed shaved off and my ears cleared of wax. Vietnamese barbers have great difficulty in believing why a man with so little hair in fact wants no hair. It is always a battle to explain if they are using electric clippers that I don’t want any comb, just bare metal for me. On this occasion the barber had only hand clippers and it was a painful ordeal getting the Yul Brynner

look. With my hair cut and ears cleared I stopped and ate some phở (clear soup with noodles) near the hotel before returning to my room to nap and read.

Later in the evening I went for a walk along the river bank, then across a bridge and back along the opposite side before crossing back over the river at a different bridge. I did all that and I still knew where I was, which was not bad going for me. Just over this second bridge there was a road that doubled back down to the river's edge where I could see a lot of people milling around. There was a group of teenage boys who had formed a circle and were kicking what appeared to be a large shuttlecock between each other in some random way.

There were two things that intrigued me about this game (*đá kiện*, "kick shuttlecock", or more commonly, *đá cầu*). First, how these boys stood in a circle facing each other, managing to coordinate their limbs without necessarily looking at their heels to kick this thing over their heads so it fell behind somebody else to be kicked over again. It was a fine example of balance, acrobatics, judgement and precision on their part. Secondly, the circle grew and shrunk as boys and young men came and went. It did not appear to matter if they knew each other or not. Along the waist-high stone wall a number of boys and teenagers sat or leant and talked or watched what was going on in the street or on the river. Couples and families with children strolled casually. I was chatting to a couple of the kids. The usual stuff, where was I from, what was my name. I noticed a young man had walked over and leant on the wall a couple of metres away from me. He fixed his gaze just past me into the distance. I thought he was the most handsome man I had seen in Vietnam. I continued talking in broken English with the kids and watched the prowess of the teenagers' *đá cầu* for another fifteen minutes or so.

The handsome man had not moved. I wondered if he was meditating or in some trance because he appeared not to even blink. I had to speak to him. Close up he was more handsome than I had first thought, incredibly so. After a few minutes he asked me if I drank coffee and I said I loved Vietnamese coffee. He invited me to go and drink some with him. I had to wait while he went to fetch his bicycle and then we walked about two hundred metres along the river bank to some small tables and chairs. We sat there, drank coffee and smoked too many cigarettes. His name was

Phước. He was 20 and was an only child, and he was home from Ho Chi Minh City on a university break.

After having the coffee and fags we went and ate some noodles in a back street. At ten o'clock he said that he must return home as this was the time his parents locked the house, but since I was in staying in Hue a second day he wanted to take me around to show me his city. Of course I accepted his kind offer. At 10 am the following morning Phước arrived at the hotel, not with his bicycle but with a motorbike; it was his friend's. He took me to all the main sites in Hue, including the citadel, Ngo Mon Gate, and of course Thiên Mụ Pagoda where the monk Thích Quảng Đức lived before he incinerated himself in 1968 in protest of the policies of the Diệm regime in Saigon. At noon he had to return the motorbike to his friend who needed it to go to work. I insisted that I pay to fill up the motorbike with fuel. I was touched by Phước's kindness. Phước was proud of Hue and was thrilled to have had the opportunity to show it off to me. When he dropped me off at the hotel I asked him if I could meet his parents and see where he lived. He agreed and said he would come back at 3 pm to take me there.

At three Phước arrived with his bicycle. He dinked me back to his home with me sitting on the back parcel rack. We crossed another bridge that I had not seen before and we rode on for ten or so minutes and wove our way into the back part of Hue to his family home. The house was small and had been built in 1969 after the original home had been destroyed by American bombs in 1968. The structure would have been no more than eight metres by six metres with a steep terra cotta tiled roof. Two small sleeping quarters were made from rose wood but separated by ply wood and curtained from the living area. A small meals area with a table and some chairs was at the end of the room. The living area ran across the length of the house and opened out to the covered front porch where we sat talking in the little English he felt comfortable using, and with the aid of pen and paper and his father's French, until his mother came home. There was no doubt about it, these people were poor. The total area of the land was about one hectare and they had some fruit trees growing, while the chooks had free range of the house and the yard. But Phước and his family did not have the same

ability to utilise all the land because two unexploded bombs had been swallowed by the mud when the house was destroyed and had yet to be recovered.

When Phước's mum came home, on another bicycle, she went inside from a back door. Phước, his father and I remained outside where I learned that Fred Hollows had been training eye doctors in Vietnam and that Australians were good people. 'Good people?' I asked in disbelief, 'How could you like Australians, we fought against your people?', I thought. If anything you should hate us. I was to discover years later Phước's father had been a middle-ranking soldier fighting with the Việt Cộng and had met General Võ Nguyên Giáp. General Giáp is considered across the world as the 20th century's greatest general. General Giáp had masterminded the defeat of the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and he was also behind the 1968 Tết offensive. And yet Phước's father thought we were 'good people'.

However on that day I did not know any of this, only that Australians are 'good people'. That day I was also to learn what real impact changes in Australian government policy had in this region. Something simple, but my hosts could not work out why they could no longer receive English programs from the Australian radio station – Radio Australia. What they did not know was that the Howard-led government had reduced Radio Australia's transmission range by selling off their transmitters in Darwin to an evangelical Christian group and Vietnam could no longer receive Radio Australia; hence no English programs. These people thought Australians were good people. I was perplexed. This is not what I had expected. In fact I expected to have had to explain myself and, the Australian Government's position, in sending troops into Vietnam.

While thinking through some of these counter intuitive responses I was to further experience disorientation, this time accompanied by complete embarrassment. I was invited into the house and shown to the table where laid out was a whole array of not just Vietnamese delicacies but delicacies from the district. I was astonished and humbled. At the time I felt a complete fool. These people were poor and I'd invited myself to their home, for what purpose – to treat them like zoo exhibits and they honoured me with this act of kindness and hospitality that would have cost them more than they should be spending on a complete stranger. I had no idea what to do, or

how I should conduct myself here. I sampled each dish and they were all wonderful. I didn't know what I was eating, or which dipping sauce I was to use for what dish. Nor did I know how much I should eat or when to stop without either eating too much or, for that matter, not eating enough, which would only make them think I did not like what was being offered or worse still that I did not like the family.

I had returned to my room for no more than thirty minutes when Phước appeared at my door. I wondered what he wanted. Nha Trang, Hoi An and now Hue, did he want sex with me like the other encounters? No, he was returning my sunglasses. His mother found them and made him return them to me because I was leaving for Ha Noi that evening. I invited him in, but he said no and he stayed at the door until I came and collected them from him. I thanked him again and he left with a promise that I would write to him when I returned to Australia.

If I had thought the trip from Hoi An to Hue was bad, the journey from Hue to Ha Noi was a nightmare. Eighteen excruciating hours in a cramped, noisy, smelly bus. The road north was in appalling condition. The traffic snaked its way along a single lane in each direction. When drivers were not negotiating crater-sized potholes they were dodging traffic coming from the opposite direction, stray dogs, strolling humans or cyclists who didn't show a care in the world. To survive this torture it felt like one needed to place oneself in a trance, impossible when repeatedly interrupted by the highest pitch air horn imaginable. It was this horn most of all that was responsible for all the passengers being at their wits end, nerves completely frayed, when the bus finally stopped in Hai Phong for breakfast the following morning. We arrived at the hotel in Ha Noi around one o'clock, much to our collective relief

Walking around old Ha Noi and Hoàn Kiếm Lake is like taking a walk in the past. The old part of Ha Noi is beautiful, with many of the original colonial facades still intact. At the top end of the old part of town is another street market. I went into the public toilet near the lake to take a piss. This was the only toilet that I was aware of that was a gay beat in Vietnam. There was plenty of overt lingering and people trying to gain the attention of others. However, I had read an article on an online website beforehand that described this immediate area as being dangerous and it warned that a number of men, gay and straight, had been picked-up in this general area and taken

to local bars only to be presented with exorbitant drinks bills and threats of blackmail. So I was not interested to pickup but I was keen to see if there was any action happening there. When I left there somebody decided that I was of interest to him and he followed me out. I kept walking until he stopped. I walked the entire circumference of the lake and sat down near the bridge that leads to Ngọc Sơn Temple located on the island in the middle of the lake. Just up from where I sat I could see a group of young men milling around a table. They took it in turns to enter the toilet and come out again talking to men. They also spoke to men walking past them in both directions, but they did not follow them for very long if they got the brush-off.²²

It was not long before somebody came and sat next to me wanting to practise his English. As much as I understood their need to speak with a native English speaker, I was tiring at the predictability of the questions and the earnestness with which a reply was expected. Anyway, this guy seemed nice and polite so I talked with him for a while. He had to leave but wanted to come and visit me with his friend later that day if it was alright with me. I agreed and showed him the business card from the hotel. When he fronted up it was over an hour later than we had arranged. We talked for short time and then he left. The following day I sat at the same spot near the bridge as I did the day before. Once again a young man came and sat next to me and started a conversation with the now familiar list of questions. His name was Bình and he was an unemployed tour guide living with his uncle. After some persuasion from him, I agreed to let him show me around Ha Noi.

While wandering around Lenin Park I noticed we were being followed by a decidedly dodgy looking character. He kept his distance from Bình but made sure that he and I passed each other while crossing over a footbridge. He was filthy, clearly addled by drugs and with a head full of rotting teeth, yet he still managed to indicate that he wanted to give me a blow job; for money no doubt. I ignored him and found my way back to my personal guide and suggested we move on. Later in the afternoon we parted for the day at the same spot we had first met. I agreed that Bình would take me the following day to visit somewhere he promised was beautiful. We caught the local bus to a small town. It took hours to get there. The day was hot and the sun

²² Discussion around extortion and the organised nature of prostitution will follow in a later section.

blindingly bright. We walked to a large hydro-electric power plant and reservoir, where at the invitation of the commanding officer of the troops guarding the plant we took shelter from the blistering heat in a bamboo hut, where he offered us some refreshments. The hut comprised a single room with a table and some chairs against one wall, and a double bed base in another corner, about six feet away.

While we sat at the table drinking tea with the commanding officer, three other soldiers were relaxing on the bed watching TV. Without any obvious concern about being observed, either by a foreigner or their superior officer, one soldier engaged in playing with another soldier's chest and nipples, occasionally reaching down to the genital region to see if he was aroused. The recipient of this attention neither rebuffed nor responded to his companion, but continued to watch TV. No one present showed any indication that this 'play' was inappropriate behaviour. As we made our way again I was puzzled by what I had just seen. We headed back to Ha Noi. It was a long slow, hot and dusty ride and by the looks I was getting, the locals had not seen many white men of my size on their bus before. They were curious and many chatted to each other about me.

As I was heading to Ha Long Bay the next morning we agreed to meet in two days time at the same spot that had become our meeting and departing point. When we parted Binh asked me to bring back a gift for him from Ha Long Bay. I was puzzled by this request, but not concerned. The following morning I paid my bill and put my bags in storage where I would collect them two days later and check into a different hotel. I met Binh at the seat at the agreed time where I gave him the gift. I was not sure, but I thought he was disappointed because he made no comment about it,²³ and said that he was busy and that he had to go. I bid him goodbye and promised to write to him when I got back to Australia. The following day I flew back to Saigon for my last three nights in Vietnam. Now I was ready to look Vũ up.

²³ I have learnt through much gift giving that it is not normal practice to make comment on the gift or to thank the person giving the gift in Vietnam.

Cyber Friend

I arrived back in Saigon and did the taxi thing again, but this time I had to be assertive with the driver to take me to the hotel where I had stayed before. This wrangling went on for most of the trip into the city. I must not have made myself clear with the driver because he tried to deposit me at a different hotel. 'No, not this hotel,' I said.

Vu did shift work for the international telecommunications section at the post office monitoring international phone traffic. I emailed him that evening with the phone number of the hotel. He called me there and I was surprised at how easy it was for me to understand his English over the telephone. He wanted to meet me at ten o'clock on the steps of the main post office. I told him what I would be wearing and how tall I was. In 2000 nobody had mobile phones in Vietnam, but some people had pagers²⁴. Meeting Vu at this location was going to pose a challenge for me. How was I going to get there without getting lost? I was determined to find my own... I knew where the opera house was and I could picture the old presidential palace, but I was still not sure of the best route to my next root.

I consulted my large map of Saigon and discovered that the post office was not far from the Opera House. I made it. I found it without much drama and with a few minutes to spare. As I was waiting for Vu to arrive a Canadian couple who were also standing on the steps started a conversation with me. The man was a bit younger than me but was the about as tall and wore shorts and a T-shirt too. God I thought what if Vu gets us confused. How embarrassing would that be for him? Lucky for both us he did not. With a wack to my back and with much relief Vũ greeted me like a long lost friend. With that, I followed him down the steps and across the road. He said that he had only a few minutes before he needed to return to work. I had no idea where he was taking me, but we went along a dark boulevard until we stopped in front of an old building. I could not make it out in the dark. Without warning he asked me to kiss him; wow, that is fast work I thought! I was so self conscious of somebody seeing us and being nervous. He fumbled his way to the zip in my shorts and he pulled it down. I

²⁴ The importance of mobile phones for making 'gay' assignments will be discussed later

was excited and surprised. 'Not here,' I said as I was now sure somebody was watching us. But he said it was fine and that he wanted to see my cock. He unzipped his pants where I explored with my hands, finding a tightly fitting pair of leather underpants; this guy was hot. This bit of excitement and frenzied groping lasted a few minutes before our equipment was packed away.

I walked with him to his office, but he said because it was late that I should be careful and I should return to my hotel where he would come to at eight in the morning. Vĩ had a pager and he gave me the number. When I returned to the hotel I called the paging service with the hotel name and street number and said I would be waiting for him in bed, naked. The woman taking down the message appeared to be shocked by this. By the following morning I was feeling under the weather with the effects of a hideous head cold I had developed. Over the next three days I saw Vĩ several times. He stayed in my room all the following day and the night after that. He went to work or went home to do his laundry, though I had my suspicions that he had other lovers secreted around the city.

Vĩ was twenty three years old. Sexually he was very experienced, more so than me, but most importantly he was aware of HIV/AIDS and how to protect himself from infection. I had run out of condoms and we argued who would go down to the chemist and buy more; he did and they were super fine and extremely difficult to put on. He was handsome, extremely funny and all round good company. He had an old motorbike which he happily took me on when we went out to eat. During this time he told me that he had no Vietnamese gay friends nor did any of his Vietnamese friends know he was gay. I asked him what happened when his male friends wanted to visit prostitutes, how did he manage that? He replied that he agreed to accompany his friends but would at the last minute come up with a reason why he could not go through with it, such as that he had already masturbated that day or he had to go to work or he was tired. He told me he was only interested in 'foreigners', and he had never had sex with another Vietnamese man and that he had been into all the best hotels in Saigon and condominiums complexes that housed foreigners. He showed me a couple of security passes he carried to these complexes that he kept with him so when his lovers were in town he could go and visit them. I asked him how he met

these men and he said at a place in District One. It was a well known disco with a mixed clientele. I asked him to tell me about his first time and what was his usual practice in picking up men.

The first time he went to this disco was when he came to Saigon to study as an eighteen-year-old from the countryside. His usual line would be to commence a conversation with somebody at the bar, and go from there. Much the same as what I had been subjected to in my travels through the country. Once he had met a French man there, and he had an affair with him over several months. Over the years he had had affairs with people from all over the world. Some were tourists that were in town for a day or two and others were expatriates working in Saigon. However, he lamented, while he liked the sex, he had never considered any of the men he fucked with his boyfriend. Some were too old, some married, others had boyfriends. Most important to Vu was that he wanted to grow old with the man he would love. So far he could not see this happening with any of the men he had met.

His openness and willingness to answer my questions was impressive. I asked him how he managed all the men in his life, and with good humour he said that at times it was tiring. 'So, how many men have you fucked in the one day?' I asked him. He said four. Starting with A, then moving on to B, then C and then back to A. I had a sneaking suspicion that I may well have been the A in this story: we both laughed when I suggested this. But he said nothing. On my last full day in Vietnam I went to Củ Chi to see the amazing tunnels and underground city built by the Vietnamese during the American war. It was on this trip that I noticed a group of roadside billboards; one of these boards was promoting family planning and had an outline of a happy looking dancing condom with a smiling face on it (a discussion of publicly displayed Vietnamese HIV/AIDS billboards can be found in Chapter Six). The following day I returned to Australia; my two month odyssey had come to an end.

A Metamorphosis

Vietnam had changed me. The Vietnamese people released me; they made me; reshaped me; they showed me my life could be different. With this one month stay in

this otherwise strange with its poorly understood people, my life and who I had been before had forever and irrevocably changed. Omer had shown me how easy and allowable it was to be intimate with another man without it needing to be sexual, but Vietnam had shown me how permissible sex with men could be. Vietnam had given me the opportunity to experience sex and the kind of sex I wanted and liked and it proved it was abundantly possible. My time in this country had shown me it was possible to create and achieve all that I could dream of; an interesting job in an intriguing country among a warm and generous people whom I considered eager to tackle the challenges that lay ahead for their nation as it remade itself, without complaint, while embracing new people and new experiences. All this seemed possible in an environment of equal acceptance, mutual inquisitiveness, and shared encouragement. But above all, it appeared to be occurring without civil unrest or regional and political hatreds that can lead to bloody skirmishes with countries in transition (one could point to Cambodia's ongoing, simmering turmoil, and many other post-colonial states). I returned to Australia determined to fulfil a lifelong ambition, which was to live in another country and learn a foreign language. Although Italy and Italian was the destination I had originally considered and the language I had attempted, and although Zimbabwe was where I wanted to work, I was now seriously determined to make Vietnam the country I would live in and Vietnamese the language I would learn and HIV/AIDS would remain my focus (which is not to say that is, or isn't, how I feel now).

I returned to HCMC eight months later in September 2001 to undertake Vietnamese language studies at the beginning of their new academic year. I'd completed a unit in Vietnamese as an elective to finish my degree in Melbourne, and while it was difficult, I had picked up some of the language and I was determined to continue learning it. I decided to enrol in a graduate diploma in modern languages at my university where Vietnamese was being taught. I availed myself of a study grant to continue to study in Ho Chi Minh City. I stayed at the same hotel in the Pham Ngu Lau area that I had eight months earlier when at the community development conference.

Bangkok is not Saigon

During the few months between returning to Australia and my returning to live in Vietnam I had become reacquainted with a Thai PhD student I had met several years earlier. He was gay and he knew I was. When he heard that I was going to Vietnam later in the year he suggested that I should come and visit him in Bangkok on my way through, as he would be back in Thailand conducting his fieldwork. I had only been to Bangkok twice before, but as a city it confused me and I always felt bamboozled at navigating it. I jumped at his offer and the chance to get to know the city better. When I arrived in Bangkok I booked into the notorious Malaysia hotel. In my mind I gave it the nick name *Buckingham Palace* because of all the queens staying there. The hotel attracted many of its guests because it was cheap and located within walking distance of *Babylon* – Southeast Asia’s most famous gay sauna. It also had a reputation for being protective of its customers that included strict monitoring of local *money boys* coming or going from the hotel.

How lucky I was to have my Thai friend Prasong take away all the anxiety I had previously experienced at being in this big city. While waiting for him to respond to my email alerting him of my arrival I foolishly ventured out for a walk... only to get lost. In that moment of disorientation, a mild inner panic can overwhelm me. How on earth could this happen? I was careful only to turn left, left, left, thinking that I would end up at the beginning. But now, you goose, you have gone and done it again! It is at these times that I berate myself with all sorts of negative comments: you’re a fucking idiot, fuck you’re stupid, one day everybody is going to discover what a complete and utter fool you are; you’re just a fraud pretending to be in control, confident and knowing. But after trying to retrace my steps I only became more confused because every corner looked the same. So I gave up trying to figure it out and got a motor cycle taxi to take me back. It was only a five hundred metre trip back to the hotel. I felt totally defeated by my navigational ineptitude.

I felt so ashamed at my inability to navigate around new cities, but especially this city given it was now the third time I had been there. This dip in confidence then fed into my feelings of complete inadequacy as an adult. I sat outside the hotel because I could not face talking to any of the guests in either the bar or the foyer of the hotel

and my hotel room was too cold to hide in. After a short time sitting there, I noticed two Thai men near me and we talked and joked for a while and I began to feel a little happier. I had seen one of these men earlier in the evening sharing a table with a Caucasian male. I asked him if that was his boyfriend but he did not answer me. Neither of the two men worked. The other person said that he had an apartment around the corner from the hotel. I asked him how he could afford it if he did not work and he said that his Canadian boyfriend had bought it for him. He invited me to come and visit. I declined, but he insisted and besides he said that he liked me and he wanted to have some fun. 'What about your boyfriend?' I enquired but he said that was fine. He told me that he loved his boyfriend and they had an understanding between themselves that sex-was-sex. The three of us went to his apartment where we had a threesome. The apartment owner had condoms and lube and knew what they were for.

Prasong took me to visit many different places in and around Bangkok. On one occasion we took an hour-long journey on a water-bus to visit a pagoda outside of the city limits. Once we got off the boat we made our way to the pagoda passing some small buildings. One building contained a raised fire pit. Four posts held up the roof structure. Between the two posts on each side was waist high decorative timber fret work that added strength and a little beauty to this structure. In the fire-pit a small amount of ash remained as did the unburnt ends of some wood. The immediate area smelt of wet ash and stale smoke. I could hear rasped coughing followed by feeble wheezing coming from the direction of a second less rigid structure that was just a few metres away. There was something about the spot that disorientated me in a way different than being lost, but it seemed serene and at the same time sad. In the little hut was a man, barely more than skin drawn over a skeleton he was visibly ill, resting on a flimsy bed. Clenched in his feeble, mummy-like hands were dirty white rags stained crimson from blood he was coughing up. I had only ever witnessed the sanitised version of death and the disposal of its consequences before this. Prasong told me that, most likely, the old man had AIDS and was waiting there to die, because his family would not have wanted him in their home, and he would be cremated in this outdoor crematorium. The old man may well have had AIDS related TB.

The old man's predicament seemed to fill me with more sadness, but it also confirmed for me that my new career path was the right one. To help people to deal with stigma and discrimination and to support people living with HIV/AIDS was what I wanted to do. We walked in this tranquil environment, both of us in pensive mood. We were about an hour outside of Bangkok but it could have been hours away because it was peaceful, quiet and had a rural feel. Maybe only a five minute walk from the incinerator of death we came across Prasong's pagoda.

That night I went with Prasong and a friend of his to Lupini Park which is often referred to as being the lungs of Bangkok. It was abuzz with families, couples and groups of friends – young and old – all enjoying each other's company in the warm humid evening. The streets outside of the park were lined with street vendors selling everything from fresh fruit drinks and food to kitschy gadgets, plastic toys, sunglasses and more. In front of the lake and milling around a statue were a group of young people; some talking, some skylarking and others it seemed just happy to be there. When we got closer to them it became obvious that this was a meeting place for boys who cross-dressed; prepubescent transvestites. They all wore girls' clothes, and I don't mean girls' clothes as a pejorative term; because, it appeared to me, none of these boys had attained puberty. They were literally boys dressed in girls' clothes. I guessed their age range as being between 10 to 14 years old. Prasong said they were older than that. While I had my doubts I did not argue with him. I asked him what they were doing; were these young boys prostitutes? According to both Prasong and Choochai they were not sex workers, it was just a place where they met. It was a place where they could be free to be who they wanted to be.

One of the boys wore a pale blue bikini top tightly pulled against his child like chest, with straps that crossed over on his back. His floral bellbottom slacks matched the colour of his top. I have no memory of what he had on his feet, but he was wearing a hair band, like a tiara, in his hair. Most of the boys wore makeup and some had lipstick on. The boys appeared to attract no special attention to themselves from the passing crowd, other than my curiosity. This was another moment of disorientation for me - what was it that I was witnessing here? I had not expected to see such young boys clearly exerting a non-normative sexuality in such a public space with such

confidence. Certainly I was aware of lady-boys (*kathoey*), Thai men who dressed and lived as women, and some lady-boys sold themselves for sex but I'd never heard or read of younger boys coming together adorned in feminine glamour.

On my final night in Bangkok we had to meet Choochai at Chakra, a sleek new gay sauna. This place was chic; modern, clean, with poolside and table bar service, steam rooms, separate spa and lounge areas. After a while it was decided that we were to go to another sauna in a different part of the city where the men were more to my friend's taste. I dislike these places for a variety of reasons, but none more so than the feeling of inadequacy. Later Prasong joined me by the outdoor pool and proudly said that he was done, twice in fact. We waited for Choochai to join us at the table and then we all left for home. The following morning Choochai took me to the airport in his car where I again caught Thai Airlines flight number TG855 to Ho Chi Minh City.

Re-Orientation

In Melbourne in 2001, before departing for Saigon for my second time, I had again turned to my trusty computer and searched the internet where I found a different Yahoo based group of Vietnamese men seeking other like-minded souls. I looked at a few of the advertisements there and settled on one with a photo of a nice looking guy standing in front of a Christmas tree. Why I chose this particular one I don't remember; it may have been because it had a photo and I had some sense of what the person looked like, it may have been something to do with text of his ad, which I don't recall. But I do remember thinking he looked nice, not good looking not ugly and I was certainly bemused by the Christmas tree – this Christmas tree I would discover stood in the corner of that room for the following four years and it may well have been there for the four years before that, as far as I knew. Over the few weeks before I left Melbourne we exchanged several emails, none of which were sexually explicit and we arranged to meet each other when I arrived in HCMC in the first week of September.

The second day in Vietnam my new Vietnamese friend Thành – he of the Christmas tree - (he refers to himself by his English *nom de plume* Mark) took me to the university to enrol in my language course, due to start the following week. I met the

manager of the program in a tiny room bursting with desks, bookshelves and people. It was difficult to have any conversation because of the overcrowding. Space was at a premium. It was in this room, and to my total amazement, the silver haired professor informed me, that, while he was very familiar with my Vietnamese born Australian professor and his work, he had no knowledge of my arrival and he also volunteered that he held in low opinion my professor's professional work. Wow! While there was space to accommodate me in the class it became apparent I could not afford to pay the tuition fee of six US dollars per hour. I had budgeted on four US dollars per hour. With about four hundred hours of tuition needed to meet my university's academic requirements this was a gap that I could not make up from my own resources.

Surely this was a mistake? My department had given me a grant to study here and I had provided them with the course outline, the name of the institution and the dates for the new academic year. So I emailed my Australian professor to explain my predicament only to be provided with the name of a person to see in Thanh Đa. The following day Mark took me there. Thanh Đa is a residential community located on an island in the middle of the Saigon River. The housing here was clearly project style building with dozens of long four level residential buildings placed close together, housing hundreds of families. We managed to find the correct building and I was impressed at the ease with which Mark found the right apartment for the person we were looking for. Each building was divided into numerous clusters with eight apartments per stairwell. There were two apartments on each level. The stairway servicing these eight units was grubby with graffiti on the walls. A few used hypodermic syringes were discarded on the ground and, either semen or spit stains or both in the corners and the humid air smelt of cat piss. The exterior doors to these apartments were either bolted or had industrial standard heavy duty security gates similar to those I had seen in Thailand.

We rattled on a blue painted gate to be greeted by a young bare chest teenager who, while struggling to open the heavy security gate, was surprised in seeing a foreigner at his front door. Mark asked if Cô Hai ²⁵ was at home. He asked us to wait a moment, and when he returned invited us in and asked us to sit on a red vinyl couch.

²⁵ Aunty or Miss Hai

He offered each of us a glass of water and then he went to fetch his mother. The room was largish and divided into two areas; a living area where we sat, and a dining area. I could see three doorways leading off this space. The walls were painted in pale blue and the floors had unglazed ceramic tiles. White lace drapes were pulled to the sides of the window. On the coffee table in front of us was a small red container with a cracked clear lid through which I could see dried fruit, sweets and nuts.

A few moments later a very excited and stunningly beautiful Vietnamese woman directed a number of rapid fire questions to Mark. Nothing was wrong or negative, just pure excitement as to how we found our way to her home, and why we had come. When she spoke in English it was impeccable. I explained my problem and that my Vietnamese teacher in Australia, Professor Nguyen Van Thai, had said she could help me. Miss Hai was over the moon repeating old Thai's name as if he himself were the messiah. Clearly they had known each other for a long time. In fact, he was her teacher at university when she was a young woman in the early to mid- 1970s. We negotiated an hourly rate and when she could start teaching me. I asked her where I could find cheaper accommodation than the hotel where I was staying. I liked and trusted this woman immediately.

The following evening Miss Hai came by my hotel with the news of some accommodation in a convenient student hostel where the owner had a good reputation and the price seemed reasonable. We arranged to meet there the following morning where I would be acquainted with my new living quarters and the landlady. The hostel was across from a primary school and it was secure. Once again heavy industrial security gates protected the heavy-framed and fully-covered internal doors to a large garage area cum open plan front room. This room housed a couple of motor bikes, bicycles, shoe racks, rubbish bins and other miscellaneous things. To the left was a stairway leading to the upper levels and directly in front of the garaging was what looked like a formal conference room with a beautiful large glass-topped table and fourteen solid rosewood chairs with crimson red velour cushions.

Cô Hai and Cô Trân knew each other and spoke at length in Vietnamese. We were served cold bottles of water. The room was hot but there was a fan in the corner and I turned it on. It would be in this room that my lessons would take place. After a while I

was shown around the three levels of accommodation. Each room was smallish with an en-suite bathroom containing a shower and toilet. On each level there was one room facing the street that had two windows and a small balcony. The rooms down the side all had windows onto the side balcony cum walkway. Access to all rooms was from this side balcony. The side rooms on the first two levels were dark which made the rooms feel depressing to me. The top level had no shade and got all the hot morning sun. Finally, I settled on the front room on the second floor over-looking the street and primary school. It was bright and light and not at all claustrophobic. I would move in the following week.

While waiting to move I spent the week around Pham Nhu Lao Street. I read some photocopied novels I had purchased from the same woman with the stack of books so high she could not see over it. At night I wandered the streets trying to get a grip on major land marks such as the opera house, the post office, Notre Dame Cathedral and the Presidential Place and their relationship to one another. On one night I was walking back to my hotel along Le Loi street past a disco. As I passed it groups of men were coming down the stairs and others were walking along the footpath, while more were collecting their motorbikes from private parking attendants on the street. One group started to talk to me as I walked along on the footpath. The conversation went on until I crossed the road at the Benh Thanh market to go down Tran Hung Dao Street. On the intersection near the bus station one of the group invited me to have coffee at the coffee shop there. It was late but we ordered and one of the men wanted to kiss me. I went to the toilet and he followed and we kissed some more until the waiter came and indicated it was time to leave.

One or two nights later I was sitting on the steps of the Opera house late at night. The night air was lovely and the streets were becalmed and surprisingly free of motorbikes and people. A cycloman pulled up at the bottom of the steps and came to tout his services; did I want 'boom boom with beautiful girl'?

No.

'You want gunja'?

No.

'You want smack'?

'What?' I asked, and as he restated 'smack' he used his hands to mime pushing a syringe plunger down as he crooked his other arm.

'No I am fine, I am ok and I don't want anything,' I said to him several times.

Unperturbed he continued with 'you want boom boom'. Before I told him to move on a motorbike pulled up and the rider came over and asked if I was ok because he thought I may need some assistance with translation. The man and his *cylco* moved away and I spoke to my Good Samaritan. He was 20, and a student. He had been out for the evening with friends and was returning home when saw me. In very short time we determined each of us was gay. He invited me to ride around the city with him rather than draw attention to ourselves sitting on the steps. As we rode about he invited me to meet his family that night, even though it was late. They lived out near the airport. While being taken out there I asked him about his life. He told me his family knew he was gay. This surprised me, and I asked him how he managed his parents' expectations of him. His mother requested that he try again to like women. She arranged for him to have a new girlfriend. After a month or so he explained to them that it was not working and that he was not happy. He negotiated a compromise with his mother to become a teacher. Teachers have such high status in Vietnam and this placated her, and in turn she would not bother him about being gay. I was very impressed by what he told me. We arrived at the house and I met his parents. To my surprise, I was taken to a room at the back of the property and we had non-penetrative sex after which he took me back to my hotel.

The following morning I transported all my possession to my new quarters. This soon turned out to be a bad choice. I had lived across the road from a school once before and at that time I found the school yard noise rather comforting for some odd reason, but maybe I was hardly ever home so the racket never become a burden. But here, I soon learned that each and every kid was delivered and picked up by an adult either on motor bike, push bike or on foot, and at seven in the morning it was quite a din. Not long after the 7 am start, dance practice commenced for some school play or maybe even television appearance because there was music that played on a loop,

continuously for hours, as the kids learned their individual steps to the rhythm of the beat. Initially I thought this was cute but after a few mornings I regretted choosing the blasted room. But there was little option. I was not going to complain nor did I want to move into the darker more depressing rooms. So I stayed put and learned to tolerate the early morning din rising from the road beneath my window.

My new landlady pointed out where I should eat. It seemed important to her to introduce some places that she thought would be suited to my tastes. Initially, I ate all my three meals a day at one particular cafe. It was not long before the women who worked here accepted me as a regular and greeted me with a smile and laughed at my attempts to order food using what little Vietnamese I had garnered. After a week I started to become bored with the monotony and I started to eat the odd evening meal at a couple of street stalls just at the end of the street.

The woman on the corner sold barbeque chicken. Just around the corner in the main street was a small coffee shop that served poached eggs in the morning, so I had a few breakfasts there, as well as numerous late night coffees. At the chicken stall I had seen what looked like chicken breast on bamboo skewers so one night I ordered two, thinking they were cheap and looked delicious. I took a bite of one of the little pieces of flesh. It was not the sort of chicken meat that I was expecting. I took a few of the pieces off the skewer for closer inspection. A number of parsons-noses had been skewered and bar-be-cued. I did not want to waste the food, and I did not want to eat them either so I gave them to the next beggar that came along. That was the last time they were ordered, and the street urchin was grateful for the food.

On another occasion I was sitting at the same table, alone, eating half a chicken when a young Vietnamese man asked if he could sit at the table while he ate his meal. It was not a problem for me, as I had seen this thing happening every night. If there was no vacant table but some vacant seats people were not bothered about sharing the table with a stranger. We did not talk while we ate our meals, however after my companion had finished and was drinking some coke while cleaning his teeth with a tooth pick he asked me the usual questions; my name, my age, if I was married. All of which I answered. I have little memory of what he looked like but remember the conversation because out of the blue he said that he had a friend who might like to

meet me and would I mind if he gave him some contact details. I did some quick thinking. What was this about? What was there to lose? And most likely I would never hear any more about this anyway. I gave him my address. He thanked me, he paid his bill and disappeared into the sea of traffic and I thought no more of him or his friend.

I had not seen Mark for a few days and I was reluctant to bother him because I was conscious of becoming a burden by relying solely on him for transport and support. He had been so generous with his time ferrying me around to the university and then taking me to Thanh Đa, I thought it would be easy to place too much pressure on our friendship. I had no desire to establish any friendships with any other expatriates based in Vietnam nor did I wish to establish a base in the backpacker area. I was happy with where I was, but I needed to know how to get about a bit more beyond two hundred metres in either direction from the hostel.

One evening I was walking along Cach Manh Thang Tam Street when a guy on a motor bike stopped to talk to me. This was new, and he was in a hurry. He wanted to know if I spoke English. He asked what was I doing now and would I accompany him to his English class and speak to his students. I had no time to think and no reason to be concerned so, on the back of his motorbike I jumped and away we went. I had no idea what I was to do, so I just talked to them. As a prop I drew a map of Australia on the white board and bored them senseless with states and their capitals. I took as many questions as the shy group asked which included the usual stuff about family, if I was married, my age – these questions I was by now very familiar with. I finished by giving them my email address. After this my co-teacher took me to meet his boss where we sat and talked for a few minutes before being whisked off to have some noodles and returning to the hostel. I was thrilled by the dare devil in me; that is, throwing caution to the wind and trusting my instincts.

On another evening I was confident enough to go exploring again. I went out using the flawed formula to turn the same way at each intersection; this time it was turning right. You'd think after so many failed attempts of using this formula I would have worked out another strategy. But no. I headed out confident that the streets will lead me back to where I had started from. I walked maybe five hundred metres and turned right and then along a narrow road with loads of motorcycles whizzing by in each

direction. While I was wandering about I could hear roars of excitement. I could see men, women and children young and old watching a soccer match on TV. Vietnam was playing I don't know who. Roars of anticipation came from all directions.

I was starting to feel like a celebrity that everybody wanted to meet because I could not walk far without people stopping to talk to me or calling from across the street to gain my attention or touch my bare arms. On one occasion a young man called out to me from a doorway opening directly onto the road as I walked by. So I stopped and he started a conversation with me, which was limited. When he knew I was from Australia he said enthusiastically 'Mark Viduka²⁶, number one'! He wanted me to sit in his tiny room with two other people. The people I had met so far had been polite but also enthusiastic to have this white man in their company. I had never experienced such generous offers of trust being bestowed on a stranger before. On this occasion not sure of what to do, but sensing that my hosts were beginning to get bored with me I excused myself and continued on my journey. By now it must have been past 10 pm, as most of the shop fronts had closed up and there were very few people in the street. Yet, even along this street, there were men riding their bikes ringing their castanets drumming up massage business. I did wonder if what was on offer in these areas was legitimate or not, I enquired about having a massage. This time the guy could only understand what I could signal with the use of my hands. It was finally settled and he opened his briefcase and pulled out a plastic sheet and laid it on the sidewalk. I took off my shirt and lay face down. It was hard but cool. Under somebody's veranda I got the work-over in the dark. I must have been a novelty as an audience sat and talked to each other while watching what was going on. Midway through the massage we had to move a few feet along to allow a person access to the door that we were in front of. When he had finished the masseur showed me a 20.000VND (Vietnamese Dong) note so I figured that was what I owed him and willingly paid. As the entertainment had finished my audience went their separate ways and I continued on my path of discovery.

Nothing was looking familiar and it was getting late but I continued on my path as I had seen no other street I could turn right into to take me home. Finally, I ended up

²⁶ A prominent Australian soccer player at the time playing in the English premier league

at a big traffic round-about. Now, I knew that I had seen one before, but was it this one or not? I was confused and what made matters worse I was being pestered by a cyclo man wanting to know where I was going. It was late and I was totally disorientated. I had no idea where I was or in which direction I should head. In the end I got in the cyclo and pointed for him to go straight ahead.

About one kilometre along I saw a hotel on my left that seemed familiar to me so I indicated to the cyclo man to do a U turn and take me back in the direction from which we had just come. But, I was even more confused and got him to go back again in the direction from which we had just turned. I was not feeling all that proud of myself, until we passed that hotel on the left again and not much further on I could see another hotel on the right side when the penny dropped. The poor cyclo man must have thought I was a complete idiot when again I got him to turn around and head back in the direction we came from, again. So after three U-turns and with relief and a laugh I found the side-street the hostel was in. I eagerly paid the man what he asked, which was too much. I rang the bell to be let in and I got an ear full from my landlady. She was concerned in equal measure about my whereabouts and also because it was well after 10.00pm, and she wanted to lock up. If only I followed my turn right rule at the round-a-bout I would have found my way.

This experience did not stop me from my nocturnal wanderings. A few days later ignoring the only turn right rule I headed in a different direction, and hallelujah, I made it back to where I started. Now, that was a confidence booster.

Lessons in Friendship

On the Sunday after I had moved from the hotel in the backpacker area to the hostel I decided to head to the large swimming pool located in a park Công Viên in District One - Quận Một. I had gone there two or three of times when I was in Vietnam earlier in the year. This pool was packed with men of all ages – groups of young boys, teenagers and men of all ages. Very few girls or women swam in any of the three pools in this complex. The Olympic size pool was divided into three sections by a rope. There were two wide lap lanes where swimmers swim in a circle. The

shallow end was left free for non lap-swimmers to cool-off and play. The two other pools were shallow and usually had only a few people in them. The entire pool area was not sunk into the ground but elevated providing a huge, clear, spanned area under it where the change rooms, storage, ticket booth and entry foyer were located. On the other side of the pool fence but level with the pool was a terrace with a small café/drinks stall and a few plastic tables and chairs. A set of art deco style stairs on either side of the pool entrance led to this terraced area where people would watch swimmers and wait for the whistle to signal entry to the pool.

Swimmers purchased their tickets through a little window in an external wall then presented it to a second person inside the foyer. The men's change rooms were to the left and women's to the right. As you passed through the heavy hinged saloon doors into the men's change room there was a large shower area, followed by six separate shower rooms. Around the corner from the last shower room was a larger area that housed the toilets against the far end of building. The urinal separated the two squat toilets that had blue doors which were easy to see over. Next to this area was an area fenced off with chain link wire that contained a small opening. Swimmers could hand their street clothes to a pool attendant, who reluctantly had to get off a hammock to collect and store the possessions.

The internal stairs from the male change rooms led to a large area at the deep end of the pool that had three diving boards, one of which was at least ten feet high. In this area a number of men sometimes exercised and stretched. This overt display of male physicality seemed quite different to what I had seen of men elsewhere in the city. The pool became an important site to me for a number of reasons. In the early days of being in Vietnam and without my actively pursuing any erotic encounters, I was actively pursued by Vietnamese men. Also, this was a place where Vietnamese men, in large numbers, met each other for erotic encounters. That was not something I had seen last time, in January. The cruising that took place at the pool was mostly subtle and nuanced but sometimes it was quite overt too.

Five months after my previous visit, I returned to Vietnam for the third time and to continue with my language training. Now at the pool men began to directly target me for sexual contact rather than the more subtle cruising I had experienced

before. One time a man put his hands into my bathers while I spoke to him in the pool. On another occasion I was beckoned by a man who had a pronounced speech impediment to sit in the shallow wading pool where he caressed the inside of my leg several times as I tried to understand his stuttered English. Once, when leaving the pool to collect my motorbike, a handsome man made eye contact with me where he lowered his gaze to my crotch and raised it again and then ran his tongue over his lips in exaggerated desire. On another time when leaving the pool on my motorbike a television repair man followed and chatted me up as I rode back to my room. He said that he mistook me for his old boyfriend; we fucked and he left.

These interactions at the pool ran the risk of exposing friends to embarrassment should anybody make any complaint against me. This threat may or may not have been real but I thought it was possible, particularly after an incident where I was heavily man-handled in the darkest part of the showers one afternoon by a very strong man who used his strength to keep my naked body jammed against the wall while he prised my feet apart; I was terrified he was going to rape me. I used my height and weight to repel him. What if he had raped me? How could I ask any of my friends to help me report that to the police? As a result of such incidents I decided it was time to use a number of different pools in Saigon and to stop pursuing sexual encounters there. I went to one pool near Saigon's dog meat cafes in District Three. This pool kept strict time limits of forty minutes per session. The first time I went there I arrived midsession and had to wait to gain entry. While sitting on a hard concrete seat a young man sat next to me to practise his English. Inside the change rooms we went our separate ways.

The pool was busy and I swam some laps in one of the roped off lanes. I rested at one end of the pool with my back squeezed into a corner created where the lane rope was secured to the pool wall. With one arm on the pool ledge and another along the rope. Another lap swimmer stopped where I was resting and started to bob up and down in the pool so I inched as close as I could in to my little corner of the pool. He started to rub his crotch up against my leg and continued to bob up and down in the one spot. He did two more laps and returned, continuing frottage for some time and

then he got out of the pool with an erection. I stayed in the pool until the life guard blew his whistle for the end of the session.

The shower room was busy with swimmers retrieving their dry clothes from the poolroom attendants, kids skylarking and kicking doors and the showers full-blast against naked bodies, hard walls and tiled floors. Swimmers were trying to secure space under any shower they could or in one of the separate shower rooms. I collected my street gear and was able to grab a shower room as somebody came out. Another man slipped in just before I closed the door. I did not know who he was until he spoke to me. It was the young man I had spoken to while sitting outside before gaining entry to the pool. I had not noticed him in the pool or in the change-rooms afterwards. He turned away from me and stood facing the corner. I washed his back when he turned around to face me with his erection. I went to touch it and he moved closer to me and put his penis between my legs and started to fuck my crossed legs while we stood. I sucked his cock. He said to me 'No stop. I cum fast'. He squeezed his penis in an attempt to delay ejaculating, but to no avail shot several loads of cum under the door onto the general shower room floor. He said 'Sorry, I only do this when I have need to'. He quickly finished showering, got dressed and left. This incident raised many questions in my mind. First, how did he know that I would have been interested in having sex? Was he gay or just a frustrated male wanting to release sexual tension? Had he seen me before at the pool in NTMK street? Did he tell me to cross my legs when he put his cock between them because he was aware of the risk associated with unprotected anal sex? I left this pool perplexed. I had gone there to avoid exactly what had just happened.

Prior to abandoning the labour pool in NTMK street as a site of desire I swam there daily. While the entry ticket allowed local Vietnamese only forty minutes in the pool foreigners like me could spend as long as they liked. Initially I got out of the pool at the same time as everybody else. After the attendant told me I could stay as long as I wanted I still got out at the same time as the locals. But later-on I decided I would stay longer. One day somebody questioned me angrily about why they had to get out but I did not. From then on I would get out at the same time as everybody else and would go down stairs but return to the pool a few minutes later. The downstairs area

was always packed at these change-over times with people in showers, getting dressed and cruising. The real action did not take place at change of session times but during the swimming time, when the shower area had fewer people in it. In addition there was some action behind the small nib-walls in each shower room, and in the two toilets. At other times men would linger in the shower area showering and making eye contact. I never witnessed any fucking here but there was a lot of oral sex and masturbation. But there were also many times that I was there when nothing of an erotic nature took place that I could see.

Pool Friends

The first Sunday I went to this pool I arrived around three pm and it was packed. It was impossible to do any lap swimming so I just occupied myself in any area that I could find. I was the only foreigner in the pool and I attracted a lot of the usual attention. Later, one of the young men who had initiated a conversation in the pool stood near where I was having a shower and asked me to meet him outside. I got dressed and met Nghĩa near the tennis courts where he was waiting for me. He asked me if I would talk to him and suggested that we walk around the park to look at the trade display there. Nghĩa was clearly very happy that I was with him, but I was not too sure why. But it became clear not long after that he began looking for somebody he knew or he that he sought to be noticed. He located a group of people, but they seemed to pay no attention to him, however this did stop him from showing me off. We wandered about and he told me that his family was poor and lived in 'the countryside'.²⁷ He lived with relatives in HCMC and he was looking for work. In fact where he was staying was near to where I was living. He wanted me to visit his family in 'the countryside', I was non-committal. From the conversation in the pool he knew that I was not married and while walking he asked me if I had a girlfriend, to which I said no. Then he asked if I had a boyfriend, to which I said no. He said he would be my friend. I asked what sort of friend and he smiled and said boyfriend. I laughed and said that I didn't think so. I was happy to be his friend but I could not be his boyfriend.

²⁷ This is the English phrase used by Vietnamese people to describe where in general terms it is their family is located or originate from, if it is not HCMC.

He was surprised and I had trouble explaining that I had no intention of looking for a boyfriend.

Over the next eight months we did have a number of erotic encounters. While Nghĩa was a nice person there was something that troubled me about his possessiveness. When I returned to HCMC in August 2002 I purposely did not make contact with him. However one night Mark decided he wanted to show me a street that *money boys* - male sex workers - frequented. As we turned out of this street somebody sang out my name. A motorbike did a U turn and drew alongside Mark and me. It was Nghĩa. He wanted to know why I had ignored his emails and where I was staying. I spoke to him and told him I was staying at the same place as before, then we left him there. As Mark and I returned to District One he told me that he had had sex with Nghia a number of times after I had returned to Australia in March. Mark and Nghia had met just before I left five months earlier. A few weeks after this late night encounter Nghia turned up at my guest house with another Vietnamese man. I let them come up to my room where Nghĩa offered me his friend for sex in exchange for money. I declined. This wrangling went for a few minutes when he finally understood that I was serious when I said I was not going to pay him or his friend for sex. Whether he interpreted my tour of discovery down that dark lane as my pursuing sex for money I don't know. But I was surprised that he thought I would pay for sex. On reflection I think I was being naive to think he would think otherwise.²⁸

The following Sunday I went to the pool at about the same time as I had gone the week before. Again it was busy. This time I was not the only foreigner there. Another white man sat in the shade near the stairway to the showers looking at the men exercising around the high-board. This week there was enough space to swim laps. Again a number of different men wanted to strike up a conversation with me. Once again when I was in the open shower area one of these men came and asked for my address. Between his heavily accented English and the din caused from the noisy hoards in the changing room I could not hear him clearly. I tried writing my address on

²⁸ I saw *Nghĩa* many years later at the opening of cafe owned by a friend of Mark's. He was with a group of people who I did not know and we did not acknowledge each other. He was well dressed. In the intervening period of time he had grown to become a very handsome man and I hoped that he was happy.

a piece of paper up against a damp shower wall and when that failed I asked him to wait for me outside. I found him outside sitting on a seat where we tried to communicate. Finally, one of us invited the other for coffee. His name was Vinh, he had a motor bike so he took me to a large Trung Nguyên coffee shop where we sat at a small table in the front window. I drank an iced coffee - cà phê đá - and he had an iced Lipton tea. Over the next hour with the help of two large English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese English dictionaries Vinh retrieved from his bag, we managed to have a conversation.

Vinh was 23 and studying to become a tour guide. He was from 'the countryside' and lived with an uncle in HCMC. He had a sister and a brother and he was the eldest child. His brother was learning to become a policeman, somewhere in HCMC. He was poor and wanted to learn English but could not afford to pay for lessons and he hoped that I would help him with his English. He asked me where I lived and offered to take me there because his uncle's home was not far away from mine. When we arrived at my home he said that he would like to take me around the city the following day, so we made arrangements to meet.

Following the city tour, Vinh said he wanted to take me to some place outside of HCMC again the next day. I agreed as long as he got me back for my 6 pm language lesson. The following day he collected me and we headed out on Highway One over the Saigon Bridge for what felt like hours of travelling as the weather got hotter. We ended up at an outdoor theme park and garden. A pirate pantomime was being played out on the lake. Vinh was proud of this tourist attraction. For my part, I found it hard to interpret the ensemble. No two themes seemed to relate. The pirates and the lake made sense, but the rest was less connected. I was hot, tired, bored and suggested that we could head back to HCMC where we could have coffee and he could take me home. Back at my room I asked Vinh if he wanted to come up and he agreed.

I was hot and dirty from being on the back of the motorbike in the Saigon heat and highway grime. I had a shower and Vinh said he would rest on my bed. When I returned he seemed to be asleep so I carefully lay down beside him on the other half of the bed and dozed off. Did he want sex? Was he just tired? I thought about a character in a novel by the famed Japanese author Yukio Mishima. A Japanese

university student had a crush on a male teacher and decided to hang back at the teacher's house after a party. He dozed on the teacher's bed. Later when the teacher went for a nap the student initiated an erotic encounter. So I turned on my side and rested my leg over his. Vinh did not stir, but he inched closer toward my body. I draped my arm over his chest. Still no movement, so I kissed him on the cheek. Still nothing. So I moved my hand down to his crotch, just like I had seen in Hanoi with the soldiers and felt for any arousal, and yes, there it was. I tried to unbuckle his belt, which I could not do. To my surprise and feigning sleep Vinh undid his belt with one, hand while draping his other arm across his forehead and eyes. I fellated him. I moved between his erection and his lips. However he had no interest in kissing. An interesting dislike, I thought. I wondered if this was based on hygiene or if he had no interest in kissing, full stop - as the months went by I was to experience a number of erotic adventures with a number of different men that did not include kissing, while on other occasions I was kissing men without it leading on to sexual contact of any form. Once Vinh ejaculated he had no interest in pleasuring me, in any manner. As he continued to feign sleep I finished myself off then I went and had another shower. When I returned to the bed Vinh got up and had a shower. There was no discussion about what had just taken place, so I left it that way and said nothing. Not long after he said he needed to go but the he would come and visit again soon.

Over the next few weeks this scenario played out between us several more times where the sex was initiated by me, and it remained one sided. Not too sure what to make of it, but certainly feeling less than fulfilled, I began to wonder what was taking place. Had I taken advantage of him? He certainly did nothing to stop it, other than not wanting to kiss, yet on each occasion he seemed satisfied or maybe even happy. He never gave me any indication that he was unhappy with what had happened. Maybe it was a power thing that he felt he could not do or say anything, but I did not believe that was what it was either, nor did I ever think he was taking advantage of me, even though he could have been.

Somewhere along the way he asked for some money to help him out. As I always paid if we went out for a coffee and I filled the petrol tank on his motor bike at the end of each long trip we had, I did not mind this small request. By this time Vinh had taken

me to meet his brother in Tu Duc several times and he was visiting me most days during the week, spending a few hours in my room where he would practise his English and I would read. We settled on a simple plan where I would introduce some new words each day to him. He would either sit at the desk in my room, or sit on the floor with his exercise book on my bed where he would write these the new words in cursive script, line after line not in any order that I could make out, page after page. This went on for weeks. In fact over the years that our friendship has developed he will often resort to this pattern for language learning. It was also during this time that, when he visited, if I wanted to have sex he would say no or that he was tired. I never argued with him. However, now, at different times he would initiate the sex. At each time it ended in his asking me for money; usually to give to his uncle or to pay for a repair to his motorbike. I had become really attached to Vinh but the sex was less than fulfilling. I never tried to fuck him because he never asked me to and because his body language never indicated that was what he wanted me to do – but on one occasion I let Vinh fuck me. This was because I wanted him to and I had to tell him that he needed to use a condom when I thought his non-verbal behaviour indicated to me he was not going use one. Without fuss he used one. I did not want this relationship, whatever it was, to be based only on sex, or for him to think that he could only ask me for money only after we had sex. Perhaps he was operating on an assumption that somehow that was what a relationship with a foreigner was usually about.

I was happy to give him the money, but the issue was that it was being asked for after erotic encounters. I decided that the sex between us would stop. I had not initiated the sex for weeks now and the only time it happened was when he initiated it. The next time this happened I said nothing but removed myself from my bed to get a drink of water and then sat at my desk. Nothing was said but when he left I asked him if he needed any money. He said that he did and I gave him some. This went on two or three more times until finally he stopped trying to initiate sex and then just asked for some money when he needed it. The amounts were small and I never doubted his genuine need... he never turned up sporting new clothes or any other form of conspicuous consumption. I never expected the money to be repaid and I never expected to have sex in return for it.

I have been to visit Vinh's family and his 'countryside' numerous times. The first was only a month or two after we met. As it was a long way I needed to ask my Vietnamese teacher if it was OK to have two days off. She had met Vinh a few times and agreed. The two of them liked each other, when they spoke it was more than just civility. He spoke in tones of reverence and respect to my teacher. They would often share a joke or something funny. The first outing to visit his family started early one morning. I had moved into a new room at a different guest house, where Vinh left his motorbike downstairs. I had grown tired of my old accommodation where I had no key and relied on my landlady to let me in. Also she had grown weary and distrustful of the people who visited me and as a consequence barred me from taking people to my room. So once again I asked Cô Hai if she could recommend alternative accommodation that was freer and not so rigid. On her recommendation I looked at a new place. There were a number of things in its favour. Firstly, it was a guest house full of long term tenants, mainly Japanese and Korean. Secondly, it was within walking distance to everything that I needed; the swimming pool, Nhật Nam supermarket, the main streets in District One and the banks in the backpacker area as well as those cafés where I could eat when I felt homesick. But equally important it was close to the hotel where Mark worked, and his hotel had cable TV.

Departing from the guesthouse on the back of motorbikes, we headed for the minibus station. The bus trip to his hometown was another epic journey, and again it was hot. Both of us were excited. When each passenger was handed a clear plastic bag I did not know what they were for, but about fifteen minutes into the trip Vinh threw-up his breakfast, into the clear bag. This triggered several other people who proceeded to be sick into their bags. Once the strong whiff of vomit reached me I had to concentrate with all my reserves of will power not to throw up too, it was a close call. The bags containing the hot steamy ingredients were tossed out of the window. An hour so later Vinh threw up again. This time a woman in a seat behind us leaned over and offered a small bottle of emerald green substance for him to sniff. Later she dabbed a few drops of it onto a tissue for him to smell. This was one of several acts of kindness that I witnessed between Vietnamese people who did not know each other on this bus.

As the conversations ebbed and flowed on the long trip it was clear that people in the bus built rapport, even if they were never to be seen again; returning to their countryside of origin – *về quê* - was perhaps the only glue needed to bind these strangers together as friends. Many of these conversations included me as a topic. I could understand the odd word like *Úc* – Australia. It was repeated down the rows of seats in English as Ôx-trây-lia, then somebody would say 'Ah, Kan-gaaaar-roo' with exaggerated intonation, followed by laughter. They asked my age – *Anh bao nhiêu tuổi* and if I was married *Anh có vợ rồi*. At other times they would speak to Vinh and point to me or direct a twitch of their head in my direction with a question or statement I did not understand.

It was also on this trip that I was going to go over the Mỹ Thuận Bridge for which the Australian government, under former Prime Minister Paul Keating, had provided the money via AusAID. The Vietnamese were immensely proud of this bridge and would often say 'Australia very good' in relation to the bridge. They were greatly pleased by Australia's gift. As we crossed the bridge a man a few seats away turned and pointed to the bridge stanchions and said 'Ôx-trây-lia - Vietnam very good'. Clearly he was very happy. At that time I had no idea that Australia provided the money and engineering expertise to complete this project; however I would soon learn how important this bridge was to the people in the Mekong River delta region. Transporting fresh produce over it cut the trip from days to hours and the tedium of travel to Saigon was reduced because people did not need to wait for extended periods of time to catch ferries across the Mekong River (*Sông Cửu Long*). At the highest point on the bridge there were a number of people standing around, their motor bikes or bicycles parked or leaning up against the hand rail taking in the magnificent panorama. There were even photos of this bridge on a calendar I had seen in HCMC. The bridge had only been open a year. Each time I now travel across this bridge I think about the benefit it has brought to the region and the absence of Paul Keating from Australian public life.

My New Family

The bus deposited us in Cần Thơ City, Thành phố Cần Thơ. With an unfortunate pronunciation of Cun-Ter City; the hard emphasis being on the C and T I have trouble

saying this name without smiling to myself and thinking, if only the locals knew. Here Vinh negotiated for a lift on the next leg of the journey to his countryside. There were a number of men keen for his business. The haggling went on for a few minutes before he returned with a man with a tiny sulky being pulled behind his ancient Russian motorbike. The sulky was attached by a device that poked through the seat of the old Minsk. There was only enough room for one bum on the narrow wooden seat and I had to sit on the rather large flat metal area that formed a transom-like support to the buggy. The floor of this contraption contained our bags and some fruit we had bought along the way. The canopy was covered with plastic. The shape of the basic frame was of an old hand pulled rickshaw, and maybe that's what it was.

There was no suspension, no leaf springs, just an axle connecting two wheels and the ride was rough. What impressed me even more than the ingenuity of this rig was its clear utility. These machines laboured with cargo of all sorts, including one with ten school children, along the narrow rural road. Finally, we stopped near a new building that housed the local People's Committee. Across the road in a rickety old structure with a dirt floor we sat at a concrete table and drank fresh coconut juice directly through the sliced top of a coconut while we waited for our boat. Not long after this we were whisked off in a narrow wooden boat that was powered by an outboard car motor resting above the water with a propeller attached to the end of long drive shaft which was submerged into the canal.

There were only four people on the boat, Vinh, me and the two in charge of it. We sat at different parts, with the luggage in a third location to balance the boat out. In the blistering heat we fanned our way along this canal. I pulled out of my backpack a long sleeved shirt and put it on sleeves first with the buttons to my back. The pair of jeans I pulled out I unrolled and laid out on top of my legs. I put a pair of socks on to protect my feet and plastered sunscreen on my face, nose and ears. The anti-malarial Doxycycline medication I was taking had made my already vulnerable fair skin extra sensitive to sunburn. I had a small cotton hat on and I used my backpack to support my back. I am sure that I looked weird in my get-up, but I was happy and completely immersed in each moment. The formation of the Mekong delta is one of the few things that I remember from geography lessons, and now I was here. With a cool spray of

water from the Mekong River finding its way over us it occurred to me this was the most marvellous journey of my life. I was thrilled to be here and to be so alive, absorbing all that was passing by. My absolute happiness caused me to reflect on what I had left behind and how I had restructured my life, living and coping with new and uncertain horizons. It was difficult to see how I could ever return to my previous life. Not for a minute did I regret what I had left behind. Though I was yet to know the effect of the privilege being given to me, this experience was something that I was not going to forget.

As we effortlessly cut a swathe through the water the outboard motor pumped plumes of smoke out of its muffler-less exhaust pipe and the noise left a ringing in my ears, but this did not diminish the enjoyment of this journey. On more than one occasion we had to stop to untangle some debris from the small propeller and the boatman had to bleed the fuel lines to get water out of them. Initially some people on the vessels that passed us just looked at me and my get-up in what I thought was bewilderment, others were expressionless as they passed in both directions. I decided to smile and wave at each new boat. After that there was not a vessel or boat that we passed that someone on board did not wave back, call out or make some gesture. There were young kids, men young and old, women with big smiles or hands waving enthusiastically in return. When I got my camera out people even started to pose for me. They seemed to be pleased that a stranger was acknowledging them and I was thrilled in turn. I felt welcome here and yet, I had not arrived anywhere; I was only 'on my way.'²⁹ The canal was wide but not so wide that I could not see the banks on either side where people lived, eked out a living or where other large barges or small boats were moored. At times big black clouds glided across the sky threatening to dump their rain on us, only to move on to distant lands.

After an hour or more in this vessel cutting our way through the murky waters of the canal we entered another intersection of two large canals. Here we changed direction. These waterways were the six lane highways of the Mekong Delta, and moored off the embankments was a flotilla of small craft, the original 'local supermarket' where shoppers would row between the boats to purchase their supplies.

²⁹ The English term used by Vietnamese to describe when being in transit – to and from anywhere.

Some people pulled in alongside landings to refuel and to disembark. The backbone and lifeblood to this region, the canals support tens of millions of people. A short distance along we pulled into the embankment amongst the litter that was lodged between reeds. My bum was sore from sitting for so long on the low timber slat seat and I was unsteady on my feet as the boat both rolled from side to side and bobbed up and down. I just managed to get off without going in headfirst or sending the others into the water, litter and reeds - but I had to resort to the help of one of the men and Vinh. I am sure they thought I was a clumsy goat, just by the way one of the boat men murmured something to the other as he steadied me while I rocked the boat under my clumsy eighty kilogram frame.

We only had to walk up from the informal berth next to a house and cross the concrete roadway to the front door of what turned out to be Vinh's aunt's house. The front door and window were open. The house was about twelve feet wide. The roof was thatched and I could see daylight through it. The aromas from the food being cooked filled my nose and the smoke from the open wood fire stung my eyes in the confined space. We then passed through a number of different spaces into a middle yard that was fully concreted, an old cast iron hand water pump along a side wall. We entered another structure which may have been older than the front part of the house. Here, the floors were red terracotta. In the corner was a small room, along the inside wall were a number of large glazed urns with lids. From here we stepped into a newer addition to this older space, a small hall with doors to two small sleeping quarters; not unlike what I had first seen in Phước's house in Hue, then we entered a larger room that was bright and cool.

The second house was Vinh's father's house. The living room in the second house contained a wooden bed frame in the corner against two walls. Along another side wall was a glass top table, a wardrobe and against the dividing wall between this room and one of the sleeping quarters was a large ornamental dresser that housed the ancestral altar. There were two other altars located on the ground and above the doorway. Through the front door was a porch that overlooked a small yard fenced off from another concrete thoroughfare and an open drain. After the initial introductions to family I was left to drink tea and chain smoke with Vinh's father as Vinh went off to

the local police station to register me for the few nights I would be staying. I was told not to go out on my own; I obeyed.

His father had bad hearing, no English language skills and a tendency to speak loudly. If I half raised my hands to indicate that I had no idea what it was that he had said to me his volume only increased. As his volume increased I would look even more confused, and he only laughed at my lack of comprehension. Eventually my host returned from registering me with the police. He sat down next to me and there was a three way conversation exchange between Vinh who spoke little English, me who spoke even less Vietnamese and his father. It was frustrating and tiring.

Part way through this conversation the father asked me to lend him money - \$3,000 dollars in fact. I was taken aback and astounded at the pestering that followed, but also I was concerned with a feeling of fury. I thought about demanding to go back to HCMC, but that would only embarrass everybody. However when I calmed down I simply said that I had no money and could not help him. This worked and the pestering ended and I never heard any more about it. In the eight years of visiting this family it has never been raised again. Later when thinking this conversation through I was confounded by the honesty with which Vinh translated his father's request to me without any obvious embarrassment. Vinh never apologised for his father, neither did he pressure me for that money. In fact he never made any mention of that conversation. He did the job of translating for his father without question. I admired him for that loyalty and the duty. I have since learned that almost without fail anyone coming from overseas, foreigner or returning Vietnamese, will be asked to help out, the inheritance of a country still very much dependant on overseas remittances.

Later, a friend of Vinh's arrived, and the two of them sat on the edge of the bed laughing, joking and arm wrestling with each other. They were playing like two young kittens. I just watched them as I puffed away on an umpteenth cigarette that his father gave me. The old man barked an order at them and they immediately jumped up off the bed and stood at full attention facing him. I was shocked at the hardness in his voice and by the boys' reaction to it. The old man at that moment had complete and utter control over these two young men. They then sat down and continued to talk with each other but less boisterously.

The house was a-buzz with people coming and going. Each new arrival was introduced to me. There were uncles, aunts, cousins and friends all coming to meet me, without much formality. It also became apparent that the meal being prepared in my honour was to be a sumptuous offering. By the time each member of the household had bathed with water drawn from the old hand pump in the back yard the number of people helping with the evening meal had grown. I had given Vinh my wallet because I did not want him to have to ask me for money in front of his family or friends. I knew he could not pay for the cost of the weekend and I did not want his family out of pocket because I had come to visit. This worked out really well. I had withdrawn 2,000,000 VND, less than one hundred and fifty Australian dollars from the ATM in HCMC before we left there, the maximum allowable for a single transaction. I felt that I had paid my way without any conspicuous attention being drawn to either me or Vinh. However, he did need to borrow money from somebody to pay for our return fare to HCMC, which I later repaid.

Before the meal, the floor of the main area was swept and washed. I was told to sit near the wardrobe and the food was brought in. By this time there were at least ten men and boys and four women present. The women did not join us but left the men with the food. I was embarrassed by this but there was nothing I could do. I ate food from each of the many different bowls and was offered beer and whiskey. This was a very special occasion, not only for me but for my host as well. People came and went, faces and names seemed to blur and I also lost track of individuals. Once the men had finished eating, the remaining food was taken back to where it had been prepared and cooked, where the women then ate. Vinh's face was red from drinking alcohol and I was tipsy. He helped sweep up the little piles of fish and chicken bones that had been discarded on the floor by the diners. Later that evening even more people arrived to meet me and drink me further under the table. Even though I was well on my way to inebriation I was not allowed to stop drinking. Each of the men wanted to simultaneously toast and challenge me to empty my glass of beer, *một trăm phần trăm* –one hundred percent - they'd say, which is the same as saying bottoms-up, bottoms-up.

Eventually the friends left for their own homes, the old man disappeared to his sleeping quarters and the mosquito net was put up and secured above the bed in the corner. It had become more humid and the heat started to affect me, as did the booze. Two eclectic fans were placed on a chair and directed over the mat on the wooden bed base. I went outside to have a piss, returned and crawled under the net to take my position next to Vinh. The mat was not as uncomfortable as I had thought. I tossed and turned until eventually I got to sleep. The fans did a good job in cooling me down and during the night I had to switch them off. I woke up busting to have a piss but had great trouble in working out where I was to go. This was one little detail my friends had failed to enlighten me about. Since there was no squat toilet either inside or out I was not sure where I was to crap either. But more pressing was where to piss. The back door was locked. I could not see where the latch was and I was conscious of not wanting to make any noise. The front door was also well-secured, but I was able to work one section of the door open to allow me to squeeze out to piss in the front yard. Thank god for that. To my surprise, no matter how much fluid any of my Vietnamese friends consume in an evening, once in bed none get up to take a leak until the following morning. This is display of self control impressed me.

A few hours later I was awakened by a voice at the door calling out *mở cửa, mở cửa* – open, open the door – I shook Vinh, who very drowsily opened the door to let an old family friend in, and this signalled the end of sleep. I was left to myself while people fussed about their morning tasks. Some bananas appeared as did a baguette filled with dry shredded chicken. I had seen a stall holder shredding pieces of chicken with her long finger nails and had decided this was one food I would try to avoid. Had I not known how this was done I would have happily eaten it. Anyway I did try it and I did not like the salty dry wool-like texture of it. But the small sweet bananas were *rất ngon* - very delicious. Later in the morning I was told that we would go and meet Vinh's mother at her house. Where this was I did not know. However it required an entire expedition of its own. The man with the long boat who had brought us here the previous afternoon had been asked to come back to ferry us there. On this trip there were two of Vinh's old school friends, his father and sister, an uncle, a cousin, him, me, some raw produce from the market and a live duck.

We all got into the one long boat at the same place I had struggled to get off the afternoon before. When the boat man saw me, he barked instructions for assistance to be offered, and I am sure thought 'not him again'. With so many people on board there was a lot of discussion as to seating for the journey. Once we were settled the man pulled out from the embankment and we set out, the canal water only an inch or two from the lip of the boat. Not too far along I was told to change places to better balance the load. Again my movements rocked the boat and this time some canal water found its way over the side; the boat man was not impressed.

As the boat worked its way to Vinh's mother's village, we went past the same array of craft using the waterways as the day before, wooden craft weighed down with their specific payloads of pineapples, water melons, or other fruit or vegetables. In some of the flat-bed barges were sand, gravel, or the palest blue screenings I had ever seen. Some of the canal craft headed in the opposite direction were empty, but most were laden. These vessels were also home to many families, with mum, dad and a child or two on board. In the small cabins hammocks were strung between support beams, clothes pegged to lines and dogs roamed around on board. As we headed upstream the buildings changed from solid structures clustered in small hamlets to isolated old weather-beaten homes of thatched walls and roofs with dirt floors. There was the occasional home built on stilts to escape the monsoon flood waters of the Mekong, but overall this region looked tired and depressing.

The water-ways became narrower. We pulled into another canal and as we swept around the only curve I had yet seen, a cluster of buildings appeared. Some had small jetties. The buildings were shack-like. I thought it resembled an illegal slum ghetto, but it was not. Our long boat gently eased its way alongside one of the jetties. Next door a young woman gave two babies a bath on her landing scooping up brown water from the canal to rinse the toddlers off.

Vinh called out to his mother and she appeared in a doorway to greet our entourage with a big smile. She burst into an animated conversation with Vinh who was clearly very excited to see her. She had happiness written all over her face. We got off the narrow long boat onto the jetty where one-by-one, we filed past a large python in a cage into the first room; a kitchen-cum-bedroom. It was a tiny space, and

we edged a little further along as each person entered the room. When this room was full other people were squeezed into the next room, which was a shop with a counter facing into a very narrow alleyway. Here Vinh's mother dispensed advice to her customers as to which medication and dosage was needed for their particular ailment. She dispensed the medicine in small quantities. The dimensions of her property were no more than eight or nine feet wide by about twenty-five feet in length including the jetty that housed a squat toilet cum shower room that was sectioned off by a heavy piece of blue plastic and the python in his cage like some kind of guardian spirit. Each of the side walls separated this property from the next. One wall was made out of opaque heavy plastic secured to a wooden frame. The contorted timber of the frame indicated it was collected from the bush and not a timber yard or saw mill. The other wall was partially constructed from what looked like prefabricated thatched sheeting. The ceiling was heavy timber planks. These same planks served as the floor of a small sleeping area where Vinh lived when he stayed with his mother. On the ground floor the flooring was compressed black clay that had been worn shiny.

Conversations and laughter rose and fell in the two rooms that afternoon. I sat on the edge of the bed along with a few others and drank tea. A discussion was taking place about the meal and who was going to do what. Word must have got around the village about a foreigner being here because an audience had built up at the front counter. The kids were mesmerised by my presence here, but as I came toward them they moved away as if I might devour them. These kids were from poor families, there was no doubt about that; many had bad teeth, runny noses and dirty ragged clothes.

This collection of ramshackle buildings formed the local market. As the meal was being prepared in the other room and on the jetty I was taken to the local coffee-cum-noodle stall near a footbridge. We had to make our way along a dirt path weaving in out and around people and produce. I had to stoop several times to clear low hanging timber and dangerously jutting head-level iron. We had to stop and shelter for a few minutes as a downpour that followed a loud thunder clap ran its brief course. The footbridge was just several long thin tree trunks for access to the other side of the water. The longer the walk took the bigger the crowd that followed. Finally we sat down, joining two tables together and dragging up a number of plastic seats. My

arrival provided the adults with the topic of the day's mirth and conversation; the kids would run up and poke me in my back or side and then they would run away, others just stared. Some of the men who came and sat at the table conversed with *Vinh* and asked question about me. Some wanted to shake my hand and others wanted to feel the hair on my bare arms. In their eyes I could have been either a rock star or an alien and I felt as if I was an exotic animal on display in a cage.

Back at the dispensary the activity was frenetic. People were crammed in the back room preparing food for lunch jostling boiling pots between two flame rings. In this tiny space the steam from the cooking raised the humidity and condensation ran down the plastic walls. The duck that was alive when we arrived was now dead and being plucked only a couple of feet from where I had defecated an hour before hand. Water was lapping up between gaps in the jetty floor onto the chopping board. I decided not to think about any of that. This was an enormous privilege these people were bestowing on me and I was not going to make a fuss about food preparation; anyway it would be cooked. *Vinh*, along with one of his school friends (who had one enormously long finger nail) and his sister, cooked. I was shown to the neighbour's shop because he had requested a visit. He was early 30s, handsome with an Errol Flynn thin moustache and thick black hair parted left to right. He was well dressed and very pleased I had come to meet him. He showed me to the back of his establishment where we sat on some small plastic chairs and smoked and drank tea. We laughed and pretended that we understood each other fully, rather than not at all. The first couple of times I got up to leave he insisted I stay. We moved and sat on a rug on the floor where he held my hand in his and stroked my arm. He was very happy and at ease with me. I was thrilled at the attention I was receiving but perplexed at being treated like a pet. I had no idea if this was sexual or just intrigue with an exotic and strange beast that had been tamed, me.

I was retrieved from the neighbour and we went to eat. The small kitchen/bedroom was packed with all those who came on the boat that morning plus *Vinh's* mother, Errol Flynn, the boatman and an old man. The mattress of the bed had been lifted up and was now resting on its narrow side and secured against the wall. The food was laid out in serving bowls with a big pot of steaming rice on the ground. Beer

had been purchased and ice was on hand to cool it off. I was introduced to the old man who, it was explained to me, had never met a foreigner before. He gripped my hand and shook it with such pride and delight... I was embarrassed. Given the trials and tribulations he had encountered in his long lived life, and there must have been plenty with his country's troubled history, this was a humbling experience for me. And then there was the fuss that everybody had gone to.

The food was superb, though the poor duck was tough. The food placated my groaning stomach and the room had filled with the beautiful aroma of raw chilli, sliced ginger, crushed garlic, chopped coriander and mint and *nước chấm* - fish sauce. Here I also learned a cultural lesson. The duck head was placed in my bowl in keeping with my apparent high status. When I tried to give it away, it was politely declined. However later in the meal when it became clear that I was not going to eat it, it was taken from my bowl by Vinh's father who sat next to me. Throughout the meal I had my bowl filled with food and my glass topped up with beer. We all crowded around the makeshift dining table; my friends sitting on crossed legs or squatting on their haunches at the table or on stools, everybody was happy - my hosts and their guests were in paradise and we all sat together. However, later, after the food was cleared away, Vinh's father, the old man and I were left alone to smoke and drink more beer. The father once again screamed questions I couldn't understand in my direction and the old man just nodded.

By midafternoon it was time for a siesta *ngủ trưa*. The mattress was lowered back in place and it was suggested that I take a nap. I needed no encouragement to rest after being sated with food and beer. However this was the only place in the dwelling with a raised flat surface and I had to share the mattress with the father. I don't know how long I slept for, but I was awoken with someone kissing me. Was this a dream? No it was not, but then I felt myself shudder at the thought it was Vinh's father. But it was the second of Vinh's school friends who had his tongue down my throat and his hand on my cock. At some stage during the siesta they must have swapped spots next to me. I was shocked by his brazen audacity, but equally I was as horny as all hell; particularly when I realised I was not being molested by the father.

This guy I had seen on the boat in the morning and in the hut after we disembarked. Nam was plumpish, not good looking, and I certainly was not attracted to him, yet, strangely, I did nothing to resist him. In fact the brazenness of it heightened my horniness; particularly when he went down on me. With this particular scenario playing out in the back room Vinh appeared in the door with a troubled look. He gave a wee grunt and glared at his friend who acknowledged it and retreated from what he was doing to me. I sensed that Vinh's disapproval was not directed to me. I sensed he may have been worried about the friend doing something like this and I wondered if he had a reputation. On the return trip back to the other house Nam sat next to me in the boat holding my hand. I was happy with the attention, but concerned that he might think I was interested in him. I had left the desire to have sex with him back on the bed.

After the evening meal Vinh ushered Nam out of his father's house and told him not to come back, he had become persona non grata. However, out-of nowhere Nam silently appeared in the door way at 10 pm, just as the house was being shut for the day and the mosquito nets were being put up. He pleaded with Vinh to allow him to stay the night. I didn't understand what was said but eventual Nam got the hint and returned to his own home, just down the road. Vinh said that he felt that Nam was bad and should not have done what he did, and he was clearly not happy with him. However, whatever annoyance Vinh held toward Nam must have waned because a couple of weeks later Nam arrived in HCMC to visit him. This was a ruse because he insisted that Vinh bring him to me. I said no. There was no way I wanted him coming to my room or for him to know where it was. The only concession I made was that I would go to the water park the following day with them. Even there Nam tried it on again with me, this time while floating around in a big tube on the artificial canal. I brushed him away a number of times, however he was persistent and only gave up when I got out of the water and kept my distance for the rest of the day.

The following year when a friend of mine and her family came to visit me in Vietnam Vinh organised a similar trip for them to meet his family. This time Nam was not anywhere to be seen when we arrived, but he did come for the evening meal. The second day down in the delta my friend's 33 year old son came down with bad

diarrhoea and abdominal pain and it was decided he would stay back at the father's house for the day while we went and visited Vinh's mother and every other living relative in the area. When we returned late that evening he was better than when we left him, however he was anxious to tell us about something that had happened to him during the afternoon. It turned out that Nam had decided to try it on with him, as he had done with me the year before. The only difference is that he was rebuffed in no uncertain terms and told to 'fuck off', which, he must have done, because he was not to be seen anywhere for the rest of our stay there.

Later when I told Vinh what had happened, he was angry, furious in fact. I told him to do nothing about it until the next time he saw Nam and say something then, not now. The next time I saw Nam was two years later when I went to Vinh's sister's wedding, where he harassed one of Vinh's work colleagues. A couple of years after that Nam got married and is now a father of a young baby.

In fact at Vinh's sister's wedding Vinh, his work friends and I were all billeted at Nam's house for the two days and nights of festivities. Seven men including Nam slept on the floor of the living room. Two of the men sleeping here were married. On the first night just after the light went out it was obvious that Nam masturbated one of Vinh's work colleagues. I could hear the rise and fall of heavy breathing that accompanies the lead up to and pause before sexual climax, followed by the unmistakable smell of cum. This happened twice in the space of 30 minutes on the first night. The following morning the recipient of Nam's attention was ribbed about the night before. The married men and the single straight guys were not concerned, neither were the other two gay guys there. Although all were aware of the events as they happened, they just allowed privacy. It made me reflect upon what privacy actually is, and that acceptance and notional privacy in certain situations allowed for people to have sex that in other cultural contexts could not be possible. Just how many elements surrounding sex consist of this type of 'movable feast'?

A Growing Circle

I went on another trip into the Mekong Delta with Vinh for Tết, Vietnamese New Year. This is the most important event on the Vietnamese calendar, a time when families come together. Family members who are spread across the country for reason of work make the long journey home for the week of Tết. Vinh and I arrived in his home town where we spent the next three or four days going from house to house eating and drinking.

On one occasion we were singing karaoke in somebody's rented room not far from Vinh's family house, where a very drunk man who was a friend of somebody's decided to attach himself to me and make a total nuisance of himself. He shouted in my face, poked me in my sides and thrust beer in my hand. In the end I just left and returned to Vinh's home, only to be retrieved and taken back, I was being rude. Later in the evening we went across the canal to the house of Vinh's brother-in-law – the friend with the long finger nail had now married Vinh's sister. We had a big meal there and later we caught a boat to go to another of his friends further along the canal to eat and drink more. I'd been here the year before (2002) when my brother and his family came to visit. This time the family had moved to a new home somewhere else and now only Cánh, the eldest son, lived there.

It was hot and I was told to take a nap in the bedroom because it was air-conditioned. The room was small, cold and it contained a double bed. On the bed head was a large tube of KY lubricant. Since I'd only ever seen small tubes of KY in Vietnam I wondered if this was the tube I'd given Vinh along with a large number of condoms. Each year I brought several boxes of condoms and tubes of KY lubricant I purchased in Australia, along with safe-sex pamphlets I had collected from my doctor's surgery which were written in Vietnamese to distribute to my friends in Vietnam. I asked him later if he had given this tube of KY to Cánh. He said that he had because Cánh could not buy it in the countryside. I thought Cánh was married with a young child. I asked him if Cánh was gay. He said he did not know but he did know that Cánh had sex with his cousin, Tân. Vinh said he was surprised at this because he was unaware that Tân liked that sort of thing. I asked him what he meant by that sort of thing, and he said their uncle had taken them to visit a chicken (*gà*, local slang for prostitute) a number

of times when they had all lived together in HCMC. This was another interesting twist, I had met Tân several years earlier at a wedding of another of their aunts.

(At that particular wedding I was placed on a different table to Vinh and his friends. This troubled me, but I went along with it. I wondered why he did not want me on his table. I was on a table with some older men. None of us could understand the other, so we ate and drank together with lots of smiling and shouting of *một, hai, ba, dzô!* One two three yo!, and downing a beer. Later, after the food was finished, I went and sat at Vinh's table. Here Tân sat with his very beautiful girlfriend. We never spoke but I remember him clearly because he picked up my camera and I thought he was about to make off with it when I took it out of his hands.)

After my nap another meal was prepared in the house opposite Cảnh's. I sat on the tiled floor next to Tan and continued to partake in the festivities. There was some hand contact between Tan and me and neither of us pulled away. Was it possible he was interested in me?, I wondered. He got up to go to the toilet and I followed him and we both pissed into the toilet bowl. He looked at my penis and said 'big' – which I am not. I replied 'you too'. We went back to the food where in our absence it had been decided we were to move our Tet festivities on to another person's house some distance further along the canal. Some people would stay behind. On three motorbikes six of us went off to the next house. The roads were narrow and dark and we had to cross several very narrow concrete bridges, they rose and fell steeply and had no side rails. I wondered if any riders toppled off into the canal. After twenty minutes or so we arrived at a new home in a canal-side hamlet. Inside were a few partially inebriated men, some women fussing around the table preparing food and some kids. A number of people here were *Việt kiều* – Overseas Vietnamese, who had returned to visit family for *Tết*.

One of the men spoke excellent English with an American accent. He was both surprised and interested in my presence there. However he was a pain in the neck. I had removed myself from the drinking circle and sat on the steps after I had got upset with this man for continuing to demand that we visitors drink copious quantities of home brew. I explained that we had already been drinking all evening and were on motor bikes with a twenty kilometre journey ahead and I thought it better that we

reduce the amount that we were drinking. The more he insisted we drink the angrier I became at his insistence. I made a spectacle of myself by shouting 'That's enough' to the embarrassment of everybody there. As I got up I told this American Vietnamese man that he should show some responsibility and that it would be on his head if anybody got hurt going home, then I sat on the front step to simmer down.

I regained my composure and went back inside to apologise to the man I had yelled at who graciously said that it was OK and that we could leave the motorbikes behind and catch a boat back. This could not happen as we were to return HCMC the following morning. However, before we finally left I went to the toilet upstairs. As I got to the landing I saw a young man so enormously obese I could not believe my eyes. Normally, and more so in Vietnam, I am not shocked by sights of deformity, because there are plenty of people with a range of physical deformities paraded around by some able bodied person begging for money. But, in Vietnam at that time, nobody was obese. I must have shown my shock because I could see in his eyes his embarrassment at being seen. He was Vietnamese, and I guessed *Việt kiều*.

I took a piss and then scurried downstairs without looking at this fat guy and jumped onto Tan's motor bike for the trip back. There was a debate between the riders as to who was the least drunk and best able to ride. Once it was settled we zoomed off. Tan and I were the last in the convoy. Midway along the journey he picked up my hand and moved it to the crotch of his jeans. He had an erection which I played with. I needed to take another leak and asked him to stop, which he did, in the darkest spot on this section of the road. I had a piss and returned to the bike where Tan had his pants down around his ankles playing with his hard cock. I went and kissed him, and he dragged me close to him helping himself to my erection. In the middle of this path in complete darkness, we went at each other like crazed animals on a feeding frenzy gorging on each other's cocks and lips. The cool night-air on my bare arse only heightened my sexual arousal. There was a huge risk of being seen by somebody coming upon us in the complete darkness, nor would we have been able to hear anyone had they approached. Once we had expended our frenetic passion it was on the motorbike and back to the house for some more food. Later, as we crossed the canal on a tiny timber barge in pitch black darkness Vinh asked me, with what I

thought was a wry smile, why I had taken so long with Tan retuning to the house? I replied that I needed to make water. He said Tân told him the bike broke down. Vinh said, with lightness in his voice, that he did not believe either of us.

Before returning to HCMC Tân and I had another session in Vinh's father's home. Vinh and Đức had one sleeping compartment, Tân and I were in the other. It was a stinking hot afternoon and the silence that was required to complete this amorous act was shattered when I put my knee through the rattan bed base and we both burst into laughter. After I returned to HCMC Tân would often call me to announce he was close to where I was staying and would drop in for a quick session. Over the following years he would email me out of the blue. I often wondered how he knew I was in Saigon because I knew that Vinh could not have told him, they did not see much of each other. It dawned on me that each time he emailed me was after I had seen their aunt and baby cousin at Vinh's room. Tân was the only Vietnamese man I had sex with who was circumcised. After my first trip down Cửu Long we returned to HCMC, my language lessons and more erotic encounters with numerous different men.

Just before my first visit to the Mekong Delta with Vinh, and before I moved to my new accommodation in District One, my landlady, whom I had started to think of as 'the gaol warden', buzzed my room. I went down to the phone on the next level and she told me I had some visitors. However, because there were so many people, she told me, she had not invited them in. I opened the door and there were a number Vietnamese men on three motorbikes, none of whom I had ever laid eyes on before. The one with the best English explained, for somebody else in the group who spoke no English, that a friend had given them my name and address and said that he should visit me. Gosh, I had to think fast because, initially, I had no idea about what he was on about. Then it dawned on me that it must have had something to with the conversation I had a few weeks before with this total stranger who shared the table with me at the end of my street. Word-of-mouth! What better way of meeting people. I was amazed again with the complete lack of fear of the people knocking on the door. It was settled that the group would return that night at eight after my Vietnamese language lesson and we would go out.

They arrived, only this time there were only three men on two bikes; the guy who did the speaking and the guy who was spoken for, and a different face. The evening breeze was nice. In HCMC this is my favourite time of the day. We roamed the streets going nowhere in particular, which is a hobby of people in Saigon. We decided we would go and eat somewhere. We arrived in a side street not far from the backpacker area, where a street stall was set up under a fluorescent light that had been rigged up to a power pole. Here two women, who looked so similar that they must have been sisters, cooked pink fried rice. There were three small Laminex tables placed up against the high concrete fence, with two blue plastic stools on each side of the table. I had to go up and tell them what I wanted. God, how would I know? So I said *cơm chiên* - fried rice, and when it arrived a few minutes later was heaven.

A Scene of My Own

After a chance passing a few months later I would see this place again. I was, believe it or not, able to retrace my steps to find it. This was the beginning of finding my navigational abilities. HCMC was starting to take shape for me. I was at last able to place geographical locations and create navigational points for myself, and I was starting to get a handle on distances and direction. There would be still be further occurrences of being disorientated, just less frequent.

Once we finished our meal we got back on the bikes and continued our riding, *đi đó đi đây* – here and there. At some stage the English speaking guy leant over from his bike to tell me that Duy, who so far was mute in English, wanted me to know that he liked me. Well I liked him too. But what an oddity this was. He could not speak to me directly, or I to him but here we were telling each other via a third party the absurdity that we liked each other. I asked the go-between if Duy was gay. He did not know and told me I should ask him. This strange conversation went on for while. Also Duy, as told to me, wanted to invite me to go to a concert with him the following evening. I agreed.

At the concert the woman singing was Siu Black. She had a fantastic voice that was big and had range. The concert was in the ground floor of a large multipurpose hanger

like space. Over time I would learn that one of Saigon's two gay discos was located here, but for now Siu Black was singing with the use of some very ordinary equipment that failed to overwhelm her obvious talent. Towards the end of her performance she finds Duy in the crowd and drags him out to sing, with her; and sing he could. They did a duet. They sounded terrific and they obviously enjoyed each other's company. After the performance was over, Duy found me and introduced me to this fabulous performer. I felt touched by his keenness for me to know this woman.

With no security or barriers, this mega star was introduced to me. She greeted me and clasped my hand and planted a kiss on my cheek. I was chuffed at this gesture. Vietnamese women do not kiss their husbands in public let alone a stranger. This was big, a statement of some sort. I was and I am so easily flattered. This woman was a famous singer and so nice. Later, Duy and I left the concert and rode around for a while on our own. With next to no words in common, we managed to find ourselves in a dark and isolated place in outer Saigon. There was the odd couple here and there smooching. Duy stopped the motorbike well away from anybody and in the darkest spot he could find where we too smooched. First it was while we were both still seated on the motorbike, with him turning around to find my lips, then he stood in front of me while I was leaning up against the seat. This went on for a bit. When I brushed my hand down the front of his tight pants to the large outline of his erect penis, he deflected my hand away and softly said no. He walked away to take a piss. Finally he came back and we kissed some more before we returned to HCMC.

While this friendship was getting off the ground my domestic living arrangements, were becoming more stressful and restrictive. My landlady banned me from taking guests to my room. Now, I had to receive them in the conference room downstairs. This was not at all conducive to intimate encounters, not that I had had all that many. However, one afternoon after this embargo, my landlady was not at home when *Nghĩa* came to visit. So I invited him to my room, where within a minute of his arrival we were at each other frantically removing each other's clothes. While we were on my bed there was a frantic knocking at the window besides the door. I managed to get my clothes on and hide Nghĩa's naked body under the synthetic blanket. I drew the curtain to find my landlady clearly very angry with my disobedience. She ordered me and my

friend downstairs. The negotiating skills I had learned so well in my previous life were not enough to persuade her that we would come down later. No, it was now! Whatever passion that was being stirred before her arrival had now evaporated. Nghĩa left without a whimper and I decided that I'd had enough of these silly rules. That evening I told my teacher that I wanted to move and could she find some different accommodation of me.

The next night I discussed with my teacher what she had found and we arranged to meet on the weekend in District One. She introduced me to my future landlady and her daughter and I was shown a vacant room. I could come and go as I pleased and have friends to my room. There was a phone in the room where I could receive calls and make local calls. Mobile calls I would have to go downstairs to make and record the number in a book for end of month payment. The room had a refrigerator, a small but beautiful desk – a relic from the French colonial period - two chairs, a steel-framed double bed and an old wardrobe. The bathroom was larger than where I was currently staying but above all the guest house was central, and far enough away from the backpacker area for me to continue with my goal of not getting involved in the expatriate community. And for a small additional charge somebody would do my washing, everyday. The guest house was full of long term tenants, again mainly Japanese and Korean. At the time I moved in I was the only native English speaker.

I was happy with the room and the location. The place had a nice feel to it. While we negotiated the rent and the rules, a lot of people came and went while we sipped tea sitting in the living room that doubled as the garage for the guests' motorbikes. I agreed to the landlady's requirements, which included no guests in rooms after 10pm. I said that I would move in after they had finished painting the room. I told my old landlady the day before my rent was due for the next month that I would be leaving the next morning. It was hard for me to read her reaction, but I was certainly relieved. The tension that had developed between the two of us was real and palpable. Nevertheless, I must say that when I came down with my first bout of gastroenteritis that had me developing a more than healthy relationship with the toilet in my room, she came to my rescue with the most delicious and wholesome *cháo* – rice porridge –

with ginger, ground pork and a range of herbs that settled my stomach and gave sustenance at a time of need.

I went out with Duy a couple of times after the night at the concert, but only once I was settled in my new room. On one of these occasions four of us ended up at a sauna and spa in District Three. I had not been there before and it was full. It was different from the sauna I had been to in Thailand with Prasong. This one was very small by comparison and there appeared to be no private or dark areas for any hanky panky. There were two hot spas, a small pool and a sauna, one steam room and four showers. As I was unable to read the nonverbal signs here, and with the absence of the overt cruising that I was familiar with, I was unsure if this place was a 'gay sauna'.³⁰ One of the men in our entourage said they, referring to them all, liked to come here when they get the chance to relax. On another occasions several weeks after I first met *Duy* he wanted to go swimming. We went to a pool I had been to once before. It was small and located off one of the main boulevards in HCMC. There was no time limit imposed on its swimmers and we swam there at our leisure. A few of his friends came and went, but we stayed until late. About thirty minutes before the pool was due to close we got out and went to have a shower. The showers were outside the pool area but each person had a separate compartment. I went to one and Duy to another. He signalled for me to join him in his. He fussed about cleaning the tiled floor with the running water. He stripped off his bathers and started to shower. I washed his back and he turned around.

Anatomically he was well built, and appendage wise he was certainly much better equipped than me. He placed his hand on my shoulder to force me down; down where, I was not sure. I thought he wanted me on my knees in front of him. But no he wanted me down on the tiled floor; where I sat. Once again he used his hand to apply some pressure to my shoulder. He wanted me flat on my back, where he sat on my face. He wanted me to rim him; which I was happy to do, but I was feeling uncomfortable with the amount of force he was using on me to gain his sexual gratification and I was concerned about my long legs poking out from under the door. He was becoming rougher and applying more pressure as he sat on my face. I had

³⁰ When I found my way back here the following year, there were signs placed in the spa area in both Vietnamese and English that said; *Homosexual Activity is Prohibited*.

trouble breathing freely and at the same time trying to provide the sexual gratification that he so craved. I lost track of the amount of time I spent on the floor and the number of times he refused to allow me to stand up. In the end I was exhausted from this and the fear of being seen, so I had to use my strength to push him aside to stand. We finished our shower dressed and left. I was disturbed by this encounter because I was not sure what it was or what it meant, and I did not have the language skills needed to ask him about it either.

On a different occasion, Phước, who was the first friend I had made in Vietnam, came from Hue to visit me at my new room, and we went out to eat. On the way to the café near Cao Thang Street we walked past an upmarket menswear shop in Nguyen Trai Street. Much to my surprise Duy was working there. I introduced the two men to each other. After an awkward moment Phước and I left and went to the café. A few days later Duy arrived at my room where he used what English he had, which was more than I was aware of, to berate me about my boyfriend Phước. I was astonished to think that he thought that Phước was my boyfriend. Besides I had no idea that his and my friendship was anything that gave him entitlement to feel jealous. Phước, for all I knew, was not gay. My friendship with Duy was only sexual, there was nothing about it that gave either of us entitlement over the other. He left soon after and I did not see him for six months. When he did return it was nine thirty at night when he knocked on my door. His English had improved some more. Sitting on my bed, because there was nowhere else to sit, he asked me what I wanted. What I wanted? I was confused because I was thinking what it was that he wanted. So I said sex, partly because that is what I wanted and partly because I thought that is why he was in my room. We undressed and I lay on my bed, but he said no, and indicated the bathroom. This was bizarre. It was the swimming pool routine all over again. Using his hand on my shoulder to pressure me to lie on the floor he once again sat on my face. This time the pressure was more than I had experienced before. Between the pressure he applied to my face and my contorted efforts to satisfy him my jaw hurt. In the struggle between gasping for air and wanting to stand up, and Duy applying more pressure to me to stay on the floor, he hit me in the face, forcefully. The blood-nose and pain put a stop to this encounter. He left and never returned. To this day I still do not know if it was on purpose or by accident that I ended up with a blood-nose. I am as unsure now

as I was then as to what this relationship meant to Duy. However this friendship exposed me to a pattern that was becoming familiar of introductions based on word-of-mouth and also person-to-person introductions for the purposes of sexual encounters. This happened to me a number of times over the coming years.

Now the new, more relaxed living arrangements became the venue where many of my sexual encounters would unfold. (On one occasion the metal frame of my bed collapsed due to the frenetic activity taking place on top of it. When I told Mark this we laughed about it for weeks). My life was developing and my network of friends growing. I had developed an understanding with Mark that allowed him to use my room for some of his sexual conquests too. The arrangement I had with him required me to leave my room when he had invited somebody there, which was fine with me. I don't know if he planned it this way but on two occasions I had returned to my room his lovers were still there and with his encouragement I had sex with each of those strangers. Mark would not leave and he feigned sleep, only for me to catch him peeping at what was happening next to him. The first time this happened the stranger had a small tube of Vaseline which I assumed he used to lubricate his or his sexual interlocutors' anuses, but he did not have condoms with him. I did, however I was not so sexually attracted to him for either of us to fuck the other and we just kissed and masturbated each other to climax. On the second occasion when I returned to my room I was attracted to the stranger there and when I established he knew what condoms and lubricants were for, we took it in turns to fuck each other. This man returned to my room to meet Mark several more times where this routine played out between the three of us. On the third occasion I was no longer bothered with Mark being in my room at the same time I was having sex with his friend, he just watched. I had another friend who said that he also watched his friends have sex with each other; 'Just like sex movie,' he said.

This arrangement did not pose a problem at my guest house as the staff there were well accustomed to the comings and goings of different people visiting the tenants. My Vietnamese friends were always polite and gave them nothing to be concerned about. My sexual interlocutors did not want to draw attention to themselves either, so they too were polite to the staff. And I was polite and often joked with the

staff. I began to feel it was a happy mirco-community. When I went away from HCMC for any extended period one of my friends who lived outside of HCMC stayed there.

Being Picked Up

If there is in fact an 'active gay scene' in HCMC it is not the visible one. Already I have written about meeting men at the local swimming pool. Duy I met through an intermediary whom I had first met while eating some barbeque chicken one night. On two other occasions I had met men while eating. One night while eating some Phở with Mark at Như Lan I met a young man whose name was Minh who wanted to speak English with me. I gave him my address and he came to visit a number of times when we had sex. He had a girlfriend who he said that he had sex with too. It was two years after meeting Minh that I uncovered another of these mysterious connections. I had received a phone call in my room from a young man whose name was Phát. He wanted to come to my room. When he arrived we had sex. I had never met him before and I could not remember either chatting to him online or giving him the telephone number of the guest-house. In fact I had made a point of not giving this number out online to anybody. The penny dropped when I was chatting online with Minh, Phát 'coincidentally' coming online: Minh had given the guest house's telephone number to Phát. Several months later Phát confirmed this.

Another occasion I was sitting at one of the small Laminex tables eating pink fried rice. On the table next to mine was a woman with a younger man eating fried rice too. We started a conversation with the usual questions. She invited me to sit at their table, which I did. They were brother and sister. She had a clothes stall at the nearby market and he was a uni student. He looked cute in his base ball cap. His name was Hiếu and he had an infectious laugh. They left before me and Hiếu asked me for my address. I asked him if he was going to visit me and he said yes because he wanted to practise his English. A few days later Hiếu fronted to my guesthouse. My Vietnamese friend Mark was in my room when Hiếu knocked on the door. I had already told Mark about the encounter with Hiếu and his sister and we had speculated as to whether he may have been gay: Mark mouthed 'He gay' as he left my room a few moments after Hiếu's arrival. I smiled at this and I sat on my bed with my back against the wall. Hiếu sat

next to me, looked me in the face and said 'Are you gay?' I laughed at his directness and said yes. He then asked me if I loved him. Again I laughed and said that I liked him and he said let's make love; which we did, kissing, and I asked him if he wanted me to fuck him to which he replied that he'd never done that before. I took this as a no, and we just fellated each other. Hiếu was funny and he came back a few times that summer. He is constantly surprised at my knowledge of gay meeting places in Ho Chi Minh City and often chides me for knowing more about gay life in Vietnam than he does.

Being in Demand

Not long after I commenced my Vietnamese lessons in HCMC my teacher wanted me to attend her English classes. These night classes she taught in addition to her day job teaching English and teaching foreigners Vietnamese. How she managed all this amazed me. She left home at six in the morning to arrive at school by seven, teaching until eleven thirty. Then she would start her Vietnamese teaching elsewhere in the city, sometimes returning to her day school for afternoon classes, then to her English night classes or teaching me; not returning home to her family before nine o'clock at night.

I was happy to help her out. The students were initially very shy but responded well to me over time. This must have been a success of some sort because over the next two weeks the three other women teaching English had me doing the same for them each week. Not long after this the owners of this private English school were told of my involvement and they invited me to meet them in Go Vap District. My *Honda-ôm* found the school without too much trouble. I was greeted with great fuss and honour. There was a photographer waiting to take a photograph of me. I met the principal of the day school, was given tea and met all the other private English school teachers too. The two owners in this venture were the very beautiful and elegant Miss Ha who spoke fantastic English with an American accent. Her hair and dress were straight out of the sixties, hair short and wavy, slim tight-fitting but flowing frocks. Elegant, charming but most amazingly she flirted with me, all the time; this embarrassed me. Her business partner was not at the Gò Vấp school but I agreed to meet them again later in the week. When I asked Miss Hà to find a *xe ôm* for me she said that I was to

go by taxi and that she would come so she could see where I lived. I declined her offer preferring the freedom of the *xe ôm*, but I gave her my address and said she could meet me there next week.

The following week Miss Hà and Miss Đào arrived at my guest house in a taxi to take me out for a meal and to discuss my teaching. They managed to get the taxi down the narrow *hẻm* to the front door of my *nhà khách*. Here I met Miss Đào for the first time. She was little older, fuller in figure, dressed in an *áo dài* and spoke perfect English. Into the taxi the three of us crammed. As we turned into Nguyen Trai Street the two women spoke in Vietnamese to each other. They spoke to the taxi driver in the most courteous tones I had heard to date. The taxi driver deposited us at a *nhà hàng* – restaurant – near Cao Tang Street. Over a bowl of *hủ tiếu* I agreed to teach for them in Go Vap, District One and occasionally in District 12. They would pay me \$10.00 US an hour. I was embarrassed to earn so much money when my friends earned so little.³¹

On the way back to the guesthouse I was even more embarrassed with their competitive flirting with me. I have never had such interest displayed in me so openly by women. I have no idea what these women would have spoken about afterwards or if either displayed any enmity with the other's flirtatious behaviour towards me. When once again they instructed the taxi driver to wend his way down my narrow lane to reach my guest house Miss Hà said she wanted to come inside to my room. What for, I wondered. I had to lie that I had no free time and that I was to meet a friend soon. Maybe it was a polite way of finishing our business arrangements, but somehow or other I thought not. I wondered. Did Miss Hà dress so sensually for her or my benefit? Was I being mistaken? No, they knew that I was not married and they were seeking me out. My Vietnamese teacher was on her own too, widowed: her husband leaving as a refugee in 1983 in search of a new country. He was never heard of again, leaving her with a two year old and pregnant with twins. I was not sure of what Hai's

³¹ But particularly I did not want to earn this amount of money because my Vietnamese language teacher Miss Hai knew more about the English language and how it functioned than I did and she earned in the state system in a month what I would earn in just four hours. It seemed so very unjust. At the end of term I gave Miss Hai money to pay for a small party for each of her classes and the rest of the money I earned I made sure that I spent on my friends in some way.

relationship was with an Australian PhD student, but she always spoke of him with such compassionate concern I thought that they may have been an item. My Vietnamese lessons were only ever cancelled by her when he was in town. And there were times when Hai's questions about Howard, his university, and his research project could only mean one of two things. They were an item, or she wanted to have a relationship with him. Whatever it was it suited me, because it took the focus away from me. It was Hai who took me to my first wedding in Vietnam. All the men sat at one table and their wives sat with Hai. I sat on her table with some of her unmarried friends, all of whom were fellow English teachers. One woman particularly asked me many questions. Later, Hai told me her friend was interested in me and wanted to know if I would like to go out with her. God... I had currency in both camps. Not used to such attention from women, I wondered if there must have been a shortage of eligible men as a result of the American war. I found the overt interest in me disconcerting and flattering both at the same time.

Lesbians

During my first three trips to Vietnam I was unable to locate or witness the lesbian scene. That is, until a uni friend of mine came to stay with me. She had just completed a one month study tour in India and we had kept in touch during my time in Vietnam. I don't remember at what stage she came out to me, it may have been on that visit or it may have been before, though, she was beside herself with concern of being rejected by her parents. Anyway, I did my best to introduce her to as many of my friends as possible. Rosemary is the best part of six feet tall, with porcelain pale translucent skin, thin; in short she is beautiful. My friend Vinh when he came to my room one lunch time to meet her just sat on my bed, speechless. He watched her, his eyes not missing a single move of hers. He was so mesmerised by her presence and beauty he did not return to his office that afternoon. I am sure he thought he was in the presence of some supernatural being.

On a different occasion, Thành and another friend came to have lunch in my room. Rosemary had walked to the old bakery in Cao Thang Street in the morning to get some baguettes. I had purchased some ham from the supermarket located in the Nhật

Nam shopping centre and salad vegetables from the market nearby. We sat on the floor in my room discussing all sort of things while eating ham salad rolls. These were a new taste sensation for my Vietnamese friends and they enjoyed them. When we started to talk about lesbians in Vietnam and what it was like for them I was surprised by their response. The general view of these Vietnamese gay men was that lesbians – Vietnamese lesbians - were dirty and these women were sick and they felt that they would not want to meet one. Interestingly, they knew there was a lesbian sitting on the floor and sharing food with them, however they were unable to connect what they were saying with Rosemary and her being a lesbian. Was she dirty or sick? Of course not, they were only talking of Vietnamese lesbians. But it was apparent they had not ever knowingly met one.

A few days later I went online and chatted in Vietnamese with a Vietnamese lesbian at vietfun.com. I told her that I was a man looking to meet a lesbian to introduce to my lesbian friend. She was not convinced of my story. She did not believe that I was a man or that I was a *người nước ngoài* – a foreigner so, as Thành was sitting on the next computer, I got him to back up my story and to make the arrangements because my Vietnamese was not so good to convince her of my bona fides. I met her later at Diamond Plaza, but for some reason she was not able to make it to meet Rosemary. Mark did get the name of a café where lesbians felt comfortable to socialise. It was close to where I lived, so a few of us went there that night. Set behind a high brick fence it was quiet and private, it also had a stage. On this night there were not many people there. However, there was a table of four women in the back corner. As the night progressed I managed to strike up a conversation with one of them – as my Vietnamese friends were too shy to do so. Yes, they were lesbians, and I introduced my friend “Rosemary who is a lesbian”. My friends laughed both in embarrassment and at the directness of my introduction. The women were thrilled to meet her. There was an older woman with excellent English, she was a doctor, and her girlfriend who was much younger than her. The other two women there were not a couple. One was what Westerns would call butch and the other women very feminine. The butch girl was well dressed, but in men’s clothing and protested when I referred to

her as a girl or woman, she most definitely wanted to be referred as a man. His name was Hà. Hà was attractive, with his hair cut short.³²

³² Rosemary's account: As I remember it, we continued to chat around the table. I don't remember the single fem woman, just the older doctor, her young girlfriend, and Ha. All the communication was directed through the doctor, who spoke very good English. She asked me, clearly on behalf of them all, the classic basic questions – how old I was, where I was from etc. and I told them that I was 22, and studying, and I had come to visit my friend. I think they asked me several times if I was a lesbian, and I said yes, but I wasn't asked about what life was like in Australia for lesbians or anything like that. The doctor then told me that Ha really liked me and wanted to take me back to her place, and that I wasn't to worry, as it would be 'Just like with a man.' I told her I didn't want to, as I didn't want to be with a man, and I would go back to my friends place. She then told me all about how she used to be with men, but men were 'no good', and then she met her girlfriend, who is 'very very good', and it is just like being with a man but 'much much better'. I got the impression that she wasn't necessarily meaning sexually, but in terms of the daily reality of being with a younger woman (it seemed to me that the doctor called most of the shots) rather than with a man who could be all sorts of trouble. Her younger girlfriend was very devoted and attentive to her at all times. Again, she told me that I should go with Ha, that we could go to her place and have a room all to ourselves and really, there was nothing to worry about, it would be 'just like with a man, but better'. Although she was a bit full on, I didn't find the situation at all confronting. She was determined, but in a gentle, funny kind of way. There was nothing nasty about it or even pushy – I never felt like I would have to go back with Ha to the doctor's place, unless I actually decided I wanted to. The persistence was more amusing and flattering than anything else. The whole time, Ha was sitting there smiling at me, and turning very occasionally to say something in a very earnest manner to the doctor or her girlfriend. Finally, I agreed that although I didn't want to go back to the doctor's place, I would go out with them one evening to sing Karaoke as a group date. Ha was pleased with this, and then took me back to your place. When I got off the bike to come in, she didn't want me to go, and wanted to come up, to which I said no, my friend is waiting for me. I was amazed that she then, in clear open view, in front of the landlady and the girls who worked there, stepped up and kissed me passionately bang on the lips. I got the impression from the watching landlady and staff that this was highly unusual and inappropriate.... They were giving us looks of clear disgust, but Ha couldn't care less. I thought she was great, so I kissed her back. I also got the impression that the looks of disgust were for Ha, and not for me. I didn't understand why they should disapprove of Ha, but not me, but I was aware of it enough to want to make the point that I was kissing Ha as much as she was kissing me. I don't know if, or how, this registered though. I guess it didn't, because when Ha left, I was still under the impression that the landlady/girls thought that Ha (not me) was 'bad' and I should keep away from her. I can't remember if this is from something they said, or just my personal impression or an impression I now have from the memory of the whole experience.

I next saw Ha on the agreed group date. I think it was a few days later. Anyway, she picked me up on her motorbike, and took me to meet the doctor and her devoted girlfriend. Sometime during the evening the older woman and I both got roses to carry, and it was very clearly a double date type romantic evening – photos by fountains, roses, very much playing out a couple's thing. We then went to sing karaoke, which was mostly Ha and the doctors girlfriend singing love songs to the doctor and I. We were clearly the girls, being wooed by our devoted girl/boys. It was actually very sweet, although a bit exhausting as I couldn't communicate directly with Ha, didn't really know what was going on, and once again the doctor was starting on trying to get me to go back to her place and sleep with Ha. It was a really nice room I was told, had a lovely bed, we could stay there all night, there was nothing to worry about, it would be just like with a man, etc. etc. Again, I made it clear that I would go back to my friend's place to stay, and so Ha then focused on pashing as much as possible in the Karaoke booth. The doctor and her girlfriend sang duets and faced the other way, while Ha and I pashed on in the corner. She was a really good kisser, so much so that I almost changed my mind.... But the thought of trying to negotiate a whole night through a tag team communication relay with the doctor was too much. Also, I got the distinct impression that I was dealing with some very clearly defined gender roles, and in any lovemaking, I would be expected to 'be the girl' while Ha was 'the boy'. Those sorts of restrictions have never done much for me, and while I could have been mistaken, I didn't want to try to negotiate all that without any language communication happening.

I'm not sure if it was that night, or on another occasion, that Ha took me back to her house. She lived with her family (parents, older brother, I'm not sure who else), and had taken me back there to talk. There was no vibe that she was going to try to get me into bed at all, it was clearly just to spend time together and try to communicate. She had gotten out a couple of English dictionaries and was trying to communicate with me herself – one of the only times when Communication wasn't through the doctor.

We gay boys left Rosemary at the café with the lesbians. I returned to my room, where an hour or so later Rosemary returned on the back of Hà's motorbike. Hà pleaded to be invited in and Rosemary did her best to be polite in declining Hà's entreaties. I was able to see and hear all this from my third floor balcony. At the sight of Rosemary and Hà pashing on in the street for all and sundry to see, I flew down stairs to see what the reaction was to this. I was surprised by this overt and deliberate passionate display, but the housekeepers were disgusted; not for Rosemary but about Hà. It was clear from the facial expressions and mannerisms of the domestic staff at the guest house that they knew that Hà was a lesbian, or at least a woman pretending to be man. Not that they displayed anything negative towards Rosemary, though they may have wondered, but they did express what I interpreted as disgust towards Hà. And I wondered if they thought that Rosemary had been tricked into believing that she was in fact kissing a man?

Rosemary agreed to meet Hà again in the next few days. Hà sent numerous text messages to my hand phone pledging undying love and wanting to be with Rosemary. The only problem was that Hà spoke not a word of English and Rosemary not a word of Vietnamese. I am sure the staff had not worked out what was going on between Rosemary and me. I had said nothing to them about our relationship other than a friend was going to stay with me and I had negotiated a higher rent for that period. I had told some people in the street that she was my daughter; others assumed that she was my girlfriend; the twenty year age difference seemed to make no difference to what people wanted to believe. Rosemary shared my room and endured my philharmonic snoring while sleeping on a mattress on the floor. The month we shared and the trips we took together, with my friends, were some of the funniest and most enjoyable of my life. My friends lavished so much love and attention on us it was humbling.

What I remember most clearly was the aggression directed towards her from her older brother. He totally ignored me, but spoke to her gruffly without looking at her directly, almost yelling at her. I asked her if he was angry with me being there, and with the aid of the dictionary she managed to tell me that he was not angry with me, but he didn't like her, he didn't like what she was like. After a while Hà seemed to become more and more wary of him, and we left.

My overall impression was that Hà was considered to be bad/dirty/disgusting, while no one really bothered to judge me at all. I don't know if this is because I was a westerner, or because I was considered to be the 'girl' in the equation. It seemed to be a very butch/fem type of dichotomy, and I guess the idea could be that as the girl, I wouldn't really do anything, but as the boy, Hà would do all sorts of 'dirty' things. She clearly had to withstand outright expressions of disgust from the public and obvious aggression from her brother at home.

Online

After Rosemary returned to Australia, I met more Vietnamese men and, as my Vietnamese language skills improved, I added internet chat rooms to my repertoire of social interaction in the pursuit of men for sex. I was still being cruised by men in the street, at the pool and in shopping centres but now I'd expanded my cruising which was not all that different from the real world except for the number of people you could meet in the one place – cyberspace. For less than twenty-five US cents an hour Internet cafes provided a new and cheap way for Vietnamese to communicate. All around HCMC you could see local Vietnamese, emailing, chatting and searching the web. Vietnamese chatted with their friends, but also searched cyberspace for love in ways that they had never done before. While this was being conducted in public, which is in large cafes free for onlookers to observe, it was also private. Friends and family did not have to be aware of what they were doing. It was easy to see what the person you were sitting next to was doing online, such as chatting online or looking at porn, though it was not all that easy to see what they were chatting about. The most popular of the chat sites were and still are VietSingle, IRC and Yahoo Messenger.

On two different occasions I was chatting to people in an internet cafe where I was mysteriously cruised by men who had seen my nick in a chat window and who were physically in the same internet cafe that I was in. One conversation took place while I was in Hue. It was a wet and cold afternoon and I was bored with waiting in my room before meet a guy I had arranged to meet later that afternoon. The conversation went on for a short while in remarkably good English. However, while this person had identified himself to me on-line he would not do so in person. He was gay and he knew I was gay because he said he had read my nick name and that he was in the same café as I was. The second time this happened was in an internet café in HCMC. It was a café near a university when a chat window appeared on my screen from somebody with the only text asking 'Do you want to fuck me?' No pleasantries, no etiquette just 'Do you want to fuck me'? It was from the uni student sitting next to me in the café. He had read my nick name on my screen. Without making any fuss and not wanting to draw any attention to himself or our conversation he did not look at me or speak to me in person. Our conversation was all done in cyberspace. He asked me how long had I

been chatting –which surprised me because I had only just arrived and sat next to him. His response to the same question from me was that he had been looking all day on line for somebody to fuck him. I arranged to meet him in front of next door where it was agreed we would go to my room on my motorbike, and I would fuck him, which I did. The moment we finished, he wanted to me to take him back to the university where he would catch the bus home. He did not want money or love; he just wanted somebody to fuck him. The following year when I was in Vietnam again this same young guy saw that I was on line and he resumed contact. In this conversation he said that he was not longer a ‘bottom’ and that he now was a ‘top’. I was curious and asked him why he had changed and he replied that it was easier this way to have sex because many older bottoms would pay for a hotel room to have sex and he now liked to fuck.

Conclusion

There can hardly be a tidy conclusion to ‘*Approaching the Orient*,’ either as an ethnographic text or more literally as a living task. Looking back at where my narrative has taken me, I notice I have referred to the latest chat room relationships anonymously. Perhaps it is because they are too recent, and I am unconsciously de-linking them from my research. But it might also reflect a change in me and my relationships with men in Vietnam. One of those changes is a rise in confidence in negotiating places and orienting myself in a range of urban and ‘countryside’ spaces. Another is the shift from being a foreigner in Vietnam to being a foreigner conducting research in Vietnam. But above all *Approaching the Orient* is an auto-ethnographic account exploring a transformative personal journey, of becoming a sexual being. And for me, as for many people, that seems to always share in unsettled questions and loose threads.

At the same time *Approaching the Orient* has taken us into the world of cyber anthropology and how the Internet is connecting people in vastly different geographical places to others they feel they have more in common with than people they interact with in everyday ‘real life’. That was another axis in the evolution of my relationships with Vietnamese men. Furthermore, *Approaching the Orient* raises a

number of issues relating to gay sex, the Western binarism of hetero/homo/sexual identity compared with ideas of sex and notions of sexual identity that differ from the mathematical simplicity that this dichotomy provides. Lastly, *Approaching the Orient* provides a set of experiences via which we can consider the multiple constructions of Vietnamese same sex attracted men and their concomitant invisibility in public HIV/AIDS prevention and education campaigns (which I will introduce below via discussion of billboards in Ho Chi Minh City). Having mostly bracketed reflection on these issues in the narrative telling, I turn now to examine selected ethical and sociological concerns arising out of my research, research writing, and research practice.

...and openly gay men have [an advantage] doing research on male-to-male eroticism. Peter Jackson (1989) suggested that gay people have significant advantage over other foreigners in being able to integrate themselves quickly into a local culture. Because native homosexuals often see themselves as being different, sometimes as outsiders in their own culture, they are likely to feel an immediate identity with others they perceive to be “like themselves”-even if those persons are from a different culture.

Walter Williams 1996, p. 79.

Chapter 5

From Beds to Desks: The Journey from Lovers to Memoir

With the postmodern turn, however, new epistemologies, paradigms, and discourses have resulted in more reflexivity and concern about the products of the ethnographic endeavour. Specifically, there has been a call for the final public texts of ethnography to reflect various levels of interpretation and meaning, to be socially and culturally located, and perhaps most importantly, to not make any privileged claim to represent the truth or reality of the experiences being described.

Kerry Daly 1997, p. 344

Introduction

I build a bridge, with this chapter, between the two endeavours of this thesis. Because I do not succumb to systematising my sexual encounters or label my sexual interlocutors by the Western sexual binarism this chapter provides a narrative pathway linking the reflexive ethnography and the chapters that look at same-sex attracted men and HIV/AIDS public health communication strategies in Vietnam. I locate my experiences of same-sex attracted Vietnamese men in the current literature, and find the literature to be incongruent to what I lived or was part of. What drove me from my bed to my desk to undertake this research was sex or more precisely, the repeated potential of unsafe sex to take place and, because the current literature on same sex attracted Vietnamese men places an emphasis on the grand narrative of homosexuality framed almost exclusively by a Western understanding of 'it' at the expense of local social constructions and local context. So it is personal, very personal, and as my narrative has shown, complex and diverse. The vivid and rich memories driving my memoir were in turn reframed and reinterpreted through the force of the urgent questions they raised, both at the time and later on.

Going Native

What transpired from my university's ethics committee as an approved methodological approach to researching the relationship between the complex issues of gay sex and homosexuality and publically HIV/AIDS health prevention and education strategies in Vietnam was cautious and restrictive because of the subject matter; and problematic because I wanted to use the ethnographic 'I' (Ellis 2009) to talk about what is not given voice in Vietnam. The guidance provided by the ethics committee left little room for me to incorporate my ongoing lived experience. Originally, I had planned to use my friends as a reference group for a research project where I would mine their knowledge and experience of gay sex in Vietnam through one-on-one in-depth interviews and focus groups, enabling me to write about them. Midway through the data collection I faced a crisis of authenticity; firstly as a community development worker but, also as a researcher and my positionality in respect to my friends and their needs for appropriate safe sex messages, not to mention the relationships we had developed.³³ This led to a dilemma; abandon my project because of the restricted nature of what had been officially approved and advised, or approach my subject matter in a different way: I chose the latter. With my supervisor's encouragement - and he shared in much of my frustration and incomprehension around the restrictions - I turned my musings of many years in Vietnam into an ethnographic account, an auto-ethnography; a memoir.

I have drawn upon these rich and vivid memories to recreate the encounters and awakenings I have shared with Vietnamese men. *Approaching the Orient* attempts to produce, via the richness and intimacy of narrative, an ethnographic account, and it uses auto-ethnography to bring to life a shared journey opening up to an experience that was very different from what my own culture's understanding of what

³³ On two occasions I had requested one of my friends to have a one-on-one interview with me about this research. Normally he freely gave of his time to me to take me anywhere I wanted or collect whatever I would ask him to get. However on each of these two occasions we were due to meet he would prevaricate and come up with some very implausible reason why he could not stay long or meet me at all. On the third occasion he agreed he disappeared for five days without telling me he and his friends where going to Da Lat. This was so out of character for him. I decided that I could not pursue this formal line of enquiry with him because he clearly did not want to participate in it and if I pursued it could jeopardise our friendship. This is another source of my decision to draw on memory, de-identify the dramatis personæ, and craft a memoir.

homosexuality is had prepared me for. I also attempt to situate these experiences in the current literature and research by offering an understanding that happens to be from that which is already written, and which comes from a different 'space'. I thereby add to and expand current understandings of Vietnamese gay men and their gay community, breaking down the external, monolithic characterisation, in order to expose experiences that are emergent and fragmented. This is an accidental ethnography. My original research plan was to leave myself out of it and maintain the distance between myself and my research subjects. But as I have explained, this failed: I went native, or to be less Orientalist, I was already too involved. I was too close to my subjects because we were friends, understood ourselves to be connected like family, or were already lovers. This failure was therefore pre-scripted by the contradiction that existed between the current structure and management of academic research and my already sharing an ongoing network of relationships with the people I was researching and worried about, and that contradiction propelled me in a different direction entirely. I swapped a positivist's need for objectivity, distance and aloofness, and a discourse that styled my friends as research subjects for what I would learn was a postmodern impulse toward subjectivity, closeness and intimacy, not to mention familial relationships and enduring friendships. In short, I disturbed the natural setting (Robson 2002) and I was/am partisan (Ellis 2005). I was on my way to another way of doing research, a tradition of evocative writing; writing from my heart (Pelias 2004; Denzin 2006).

Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research and its definitions vary significantly across time, the separate social sciences, and among those who use it, critique it or think about it. Sotirios Sarantakos writes:

...ethnography is the science of 'ethnos', that is, nation, people or culture...While some retain the name and definition [of ethnography] as stated, others use the terms social anthropology, cultural anthropology or ethnology instead...some use the terms interchangeably, others consider them to be separate disciplines. Beyond this, ethnography has been seen as the science of cultural description, a

description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system, the study of cultures with the purpose of understanding them from the native point of view (Sarantakos 2005 p. 207).

What is not disputed is that ethnographic research was originally considered the principle domain of anthropology where anthropologists were often romanticised 'as the lone researcher' (Denzin & Lincoln 2005 p 3) who used ethnography to primarily write about primitive cultures in exotic locations (Patton 2002; Robson 2002; Sarantakos 2005). Ethnographic research has now evolved where the 'image of the lone ethnographer has been shattered' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005 p. 15) and as Michael Quinn Patton says, ethnography has now come to encompass all the social sciences where ethnographic methods have been applied to study contemporary social issues such as:

...technological diffusion, globalization, environmental degradation, poverty, the gap between rich and poor, and societal breakdown (Scudder 1999); education (Spindler and Hammond 2000); addiction (Agar 1986; Agar and Reisinger 1999); child labour (Kenny 1999); intercultural understanding in schools (Jervis 1999); and international boarder conflicts (Hart 1999)... (Patton 2002 p. 81).

This expanded use of ethnography in the qualitative tradition also includes the study of gay sex and homo/sexuality and HIV/AIDS (see Bolton 1995; 1998; Murray 1995; 1996; Myrick 1996; Carrier 1999).

It is not within the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth history of or provide a concomitant anthology to the history of qualitative research. The literature is too large and there are too many distinguished scholars who can claim parentage to each nuance within this large canon of scholarly work. Denzin and Lincoln (2005 pp 14-20) in their review of the history of ethnography as a method identify the 'post-experimental' period between 1995-2000 as one in which a concerted interest in the contribution of biographical approaches emerged. Over time the ethnographic enterprise writes the other in one of two fashions; either in positivist terms steeped in the tradition of scientism, with clear signs of being objective, offering validity, and clearly positioning the researcher and the subject as discrete and separate from each

other. That is, the field and the subject matter remain 'unpolluted' by the ethnographer and the presence of his or her self. Since the postmodern turn ethnography is being presented in a miscellany of forms, including 'messy' texts. This collection of ethnographic forms rejects scientism, refutes objectivity, celebrates subjectivity, embraces intimacies, acknowledges the connectedness between researcher and the researched. These ethnographic accounts show relationships in the ethnographic enterprise positioning autoethnography as a legitimate tool in understanding people, their lives and their situations in a social context which is not universal, where understanding the self through reflexivity provides a closeness to the subject matter that cannot be gained in other ways (Muncey 2010, Ellis 2009, Bolton 1995, Carrier 1999). Such closeness, achieved through acknowledgement of context, relationships and events, reveals otherwise hidden dimensions within and around social processes, dimensions that would appear to be among the most crucial when it comes to challenging dominant discourses (Spry 2001) in cross-cultural studies of sexuality and also in community development.

Auto-ethnography

...the desire to write from the heart, to put on display a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study

Ronald Pelias 2004 p. 1

Auto-ethnography has been gaining acceptance as a research method over the last ten years (Ellis 2009), across the social sciences and humanities. Qualitative research employing an auto-ethnographic approach can 'range from starting research from one's own perspective, to studies where the researcher's experience is explored alongside those of the participants, through to stories where the researcher's experience of conducting the research become the actual focus of investigation' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, cited in Foster, McAllister & O'Brien 2006 p. 45). Auto-ethnographers focus on the self as a starting point to interrogate their own epistemology but also to use the self as a platform from which to explore broader social and cultural issues. With an awareness of the self the researcher can focus on the broader context in

which their experiences have taken place in. But how the auto-ethnographer sees their purpose varies greatly to the point where Norman Denzin (2006 p. 420) rightly ask if 'it's déjà vu all over again' because there is no single approach to the endeavour. In support of this claim he cites Carolyn Ellis (2000), Tami Spry (2001), Mark Nuemann (1996) Leon Anderson (2006) and Stacy Homan Jones (2005) as having five very different perspectives as to where to begin.

For Carolyn Ellis (2004 p. xix) 'autoethnography is... research, writing and methods that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection'; Tami Spry (2001 p. 710) describes autoethnography as '...a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context'; Mark Neumann (1996 p. 189) argues that autoethnographic texts '...democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expression of discursive power'; Leon Anderson (2006 p. 375) has noted how the analytic of autoethnography has five key features. It is ethnographic work in which the researcher '(a) is a full member in a research group or setting; (b) uses analytic reflexivity; (c) has a visible narrative in the written text; (d) engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self; (f) is committed to analytic research agendas focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena'; Stacy Holman Jones (2005 p. 765) understands autoethnography to be a 'blurred genre...a response to the call [of lived experience]... it is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art... making a text present... refusing categorization... believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world'. Denzin asks,

Apples and oranges-are we dealing with two different things? Leon wants to use analytic reflexivity to improve theoretical understandings. Stacy wants to change the world. Carolyn wants to embed the personal in the social. Tami Spry's self-narratives critique the social situatedness of identity. Mark wants to "democratize the representational sphere of culture" by writing outward from the self to the social. Are we in parallel or separate universes (Denzin 2006 p.420)?

In proposing the rhetorical 'apple and oranges' question Denzin highlights the differences between how the better known practitioners of autoethnography frame and conceive their contribution to the ethnographic endeavour. But in doing so he also demonstrates what confronts inexperienced writers when trying to position their own work, because there is no single approach. When I read these descriptors of a genre that I am grappling with I find it difficult to take sides. For me the lines are blurred, the autoethnographic endeavour is evocative autobiographical writing, but it is not necessarily autobiography. It is writing of multiple selves where knowledge is produced and understood in a shared social and cultural context that contests grand narratives and dominant contemporary discourse. It is reflexive and passionate and wants to change the world by writing from the heart. In writing from the heart the autoethnographic product should also create a tension between its representation and contemporary research in the subject area.

While it is becoming less easy to justify, auto-ethnography has been pejoratively dismissed as being cathartic, therapeutic for both researcher and reader, an ego trip (Gans 1999), self indulgent and confessional (Altman 2002). Early on ethnographers within anthropology such as Jarvie (1988, cited in Kulick and Willson 1995) wrote of reflexive anthropology as an enterprise in navel gazing, or even trivial or heretical (Pratt 1986 cited in Kulick and Willson 1995). Grappling with questions of sexuality, Ralph Bolton says that auto-ethnography can be all of these things, but there are times, such as 'when the behaviours being studied are not generally ones which people will speak openly, which is often the case with respect to sex or situations where opportunities for observing behaviours are limited, which is usually true in the area of sexuality' (1999 p 438), that using autobiography is the only way to interrogate and articulate an aspect of human experience. However, for me the most stinging attack is from Herbert Gans when he states:

I also feel sorry for ethnographers who want to turn the people they study into friends, and, in some cases, colleagues in suffering. Once researchers fail to distance themselves from the people they are studying, however, or fail to allow them the same distancing, the rules of qualitative reliability and validity are

sidestepped, reducing the likelihood that sociologists and their work will be trusted by their readers (Gans 1999 p.542-543).

In the era of understanding HIV/AIDS Gans point seems outdated and restrictive, with overtones of resentment and elements of elitism and xenophobia. I am not sure what he really means by 'ethnographers who want to turn the people they study into friends'. I am not sure that you can 'turn' any people into friends. For me friendships happen, they evolve and are organic, not mechanical or forced. In my situation I was already friends with some people and we had developed a range of relationships before my research started. It was the intimacy in these relationships that alerted me to a range of concerns. So, how is one to study and interpret phenomena that are, in the natural setting, the most private and personal of behaviours that involves intimate others? For me, that choice was an autoethnographic memoir, auto-ethnography being, as Ralph Bolton has shown, citing the pioneering lifetime ethnographic work done by Joe Carrier studying male homosexuality in Mexico, as the most appropriate and effective means of accessing intimate experiences. As Amanda Coffey has noted of Bolton's work:

Bolton argues that his active, sexual participation was a valuable means of gaining information and insight into the Belgian gay community. Indeed the sorts of data he was able to collect were only valuable because of such participation. Without his physical sexual engagement with the field, his data might well have been different.

(Coffey 1999 p.84)

Conversely, Coffey also reminds us that as ethnographers it is not imperative to participate sexually in such settings in order to collect data, (see Humphreys, 1970, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal sex in public places*). Being a *watchqueen*³⁴ provided Humphrey the chance to observe sex between men in a public setting.

However controversial Humphrey's approach was at that time, ethnography has evolved and research ethics have moved forward to become codified, argued about

³⁴ Humphreys' term watchqueen refers his actual position in a public place (public toilet) and the role he played in alerting men who were engaging in some form of sexual activity of people approaching these public toilets and the risk of being seen.

and legally contested as institutional research panels have become the gate keepers of all university research. But also, from the time HIV/AIDS began to emerged on the global research agenda and it has presented real dilemmas for all stakeholders' interested in research being conducted ethically as well as for those people with an interest in the subject. Most HIV transmissions are transmitted through sex; anal or vaginal sex. There is no ambiguity amongst health professionals that wearing a condom during anal or vaginal sex virtually eliminates the risk of HIV infections. But in many situations same-sex attracted men have received scant research attention and have had dominant development discourses applied to minorities (I prefer just 'people') whose understandings differ widely from those of most of the research community. In reality how this knowledge is applied in the real world context by at risk groups raises concerns for people who act in and experience the world differently. And this is where Bolton's point about autoethnography and intimacy is most important because it relates to critical information that is difficult to obtain by other methods:

Information obtained post-coitally...when people tend to relax and open up about their lives, was always richer, more from the heart and more revealing than the data gathered in a more detached manner. Once one has shared physical and emotional intimacy, sharing other knowledge about oneself seems easier (Bolton 1995 p. 148-9).

I have already raised the problem of my lived experience and the current literature in Vietnam. Some of the current literature accords with my ethnographic account and supports findings on sexual practises of same sex attracted men. But more disturbingly, my ethnography shows that some of the latest attempts to portray Vietnamese same-sex attracted men within a Western homosexual framework misses the mark in terms of most same-sex attracted men in Vietnam live their lives. This could not have been uncovered using traditional objective approaches. It was in 'the writing of the experience with intimate others where I was to think it through, improvise, write and rewrite, anticipate and feel its consequences' (Ellis 2009 p309) that I have sought to make available to at least some degree the meanings and structures of feeling that inform their sexuality. Because it has taken the structure of a memoir, my autoethnography was not conducted, for the most part, on the basis of negotiating or

arranging entry into their lives for the purpose of research. My relationships were not entered into for the purpose of conducting autoethnographic research. This might pose ethical questions for some, because my research subjects were never given the opportunity to agree to being part of my research. (While I have been able to explain to some friends what I am doing with my memories of our shared experience, I have not been able to with those with whom I no longer share a social horizon.) I have constructed an ethnographic account in memoir format to rework what I was part of because I believe it enables me to point out serious deficiencies in the current literature on HIV/AIDS and gay men in Vietnam and challenges dominant and 'othering' discourse.

Approaching the Orient is in part about drawing upon and interpreting past experience, and the writing of it allowed the 'reworking of what has already happened to give current events meaning' (Steedman 1986 p 5). Memoir is a legitimate method in the social sciences, helping ethnographers to explore real life problems and situations. Autoethnography is autobiographical writing but it is not autobiography, which is a different genre of writing to memoir. Memoir provides the mechanism to retrospectively consider phenomena. Memoir, by definition, accepts fragments of a life lived. With the construction of my memoir I paid particular care to negotiate the fraught ethical terrain of 'duty of care' and people being 'research subjects' and move the typical anthropological gaze from falling upon my friends and instead, directing it back to me.

The memoir approach to writing offered me a number of methodological benefits. First, it was the vehicle that allowed me to retrospectively recreate the journey I took as a person-becoming-a-friend-becoming-a-researcher and reshape it into an account accessible to the research community. Secondly, I was writing about personal sexual encounters, not often written about in research, and I had to avoid the pitfalls of being self indulgent and tacky. At the same time, however, I have tried not to mask my real naivety and, indeed, vanity, nor portray myself as 'unmotivated' (in several senses): while this choice must be grating for most readers, it would have been dishonest to reframe myself as the detached and all knowing ethnographer. Thirdly, learning how to write about an idea that emanated from personal sexual encounters was difficult. Like

so many people before me, nobody taught me how to study homosexuality (see for example Bolton 1995; Murray 1996) though at the time of the sexual encounters I was not studying 'homosexuality', just living it.

Memoir

As I have already established, memoir is included in the ethnographers' repertoire for writing creative non-fiction. While memoir is autobiographical writing it is a different vehicle from that of autobiography, and in my case it is sex and not my whole life (Steedman 1986; Miller 2007) that is of interest. The term memoir comes from the French *memoire* and from the Latin *memoria*, meaning 'memory,' or a reminiscence. Memoir is auto-biographical writing but it does not usually attend to the same exactitude with precise dates, or use of other source material for means of verification, as auto-biography does. A memoir usually has a particular focus of attention that is descriptive of events and shows why they are significant and why they continue in the memory of the writer (Burch 1999; Miller 2007) and as such a memoir is only part of one's life or fragments of it whereby the chronological scope of the memoir is determined by the work's context and is therefore more focused and flexible and, as the word implies, is constructed from memory. Autobiographies, in contrast, tend to encompass an entire life – cradle to grave writing – seeking out those formative years/moments or people/person who make the subject of the autobiography the person that they are. By definition my auto-ethnography is a memoir and therefore it is axiomatic that because it is written from memory it can only be a retrospective account of what I was part of and witness to (Zinsser 1987; Burch 1999; Zuwiyya 2000; Miller 2007).

Bias and Objectivity

Is it possible to speak of being objective in opening up to the subjective? Total objectivity seems incongruous when so much of this thesis is subjective. But not all research need be objective and removed (Bolton 1995), and because this thesis is unequivocally partisan, I do take the side of my friends; as Ellis puts it, 'I do not

subscribe to neutrality; instead I believe in being involved in and caring about those in my studies' (2009 p 14). Furthermore, I have already shown how the postmodern turn in ethnography has rendered a positivist approach questionable in the ethnographic endeavour. It would, then, be somewhat ironic if I was to hide myself and write from behind a veil of objectivity when the embodied me is 186 centimetres tall and 110kgs in weight. I cannot be anything other than visible and easily identifiable in the social and cultural context I share with people in Vietnam and this in itself becomes part of the shared experiences I write about. In the rest of this chapter I deal with many of the fraught issues that arise from using memoir as a method, as well as considering some of the contradictions that have since emerged in my research.

I began, during my experiences in Vietnam, to feel I had been accepted into the broader community and I was freely travelling around the city and the country with ease. I was establishing my own life and my own network of friends, meeting people as I went, constantly being alert to what I was experiencing and comparing it with what I thought I understood. By comparing what I knew and understood 'gay' to mean with what I was becoming a part of, I was faced with contradictions. Without knowing it, I started this reflexive process and was analysing it by seeking to understand and find meaning to this phenomena. This reflexivity also presented me with something additional that required careful consideration, even a personal quandary because I would find it difficult to separate my life from what would become my research project.

My one-on-one erotic encounters provided me with insights that I could not leave behind me as I made the move into research, and memoir provided a way to allow those insights, those recent memories, to move forward with me. Whether these insights are original or are just ordinary insights they are ethnographic accounts of what happened. Drawn from my life experience they allow a reference to a lived experience a perspective that is lacking in current research in this field. My account records negotiations in a personal and community space where male same-sex erotic encounters can and do occur, regular and commonplace encounters that are not catered for in HIV/AIDS prevention and education public health campaigns in Vietnam. *Approaching the Orient* is an auto-ethnographic account and reflexive ethnography, and it therefore does not claim to be a complete picture, nor do I claim to know all

about homosexuality in Ho Chi Minh City, let alone in Vietnam. Nevertheless, what my lived experience does provide is a space to consider phenomenologically how homosexuality is constructed in Ho Chi Minh City. My aim has been to provide an account (and an analysis) that is experience rich.

The Inseparability between Life and Research

I now find as a researcher that it is difficult to separate my research and my life. Stephen Murray puts it like this:

I was not in Mesoamerica specifically to “do research”, with no funding of any sort, and had no official sanction for research, I think that I am always “on” as an observer, contrasting what I see and feel and hear with theories and descriptions I know. Research and life are not distinctly compartmentalised for me (Murray 1996 p 236).

I lived in Vietnam between 2001 and 2004 and that experience was similar to Murray’s early experience in Mesoamerica, as I had no official funding to undertake research, nor was I attached to any institution either in Vietnam or in Australia. I was not knowingly undertaking any data collection for any later research project. But I was constantly ‘on’ participating in the life of others and observing and ruminating over what I was seeing; what I was witness to. For a long time I felt as if I was experiencing an out of body experience; that is, in observing my new and extraordinary life from above while actually taking part in it. I felt as if I was on the outside; not as an outsider, but looking-in through a window, silently, a voyeur.

It is Ralph Bolton and his experience dealing with gay sexual encounters in Belgium that I have been most drawn to since deciding to draw on my own life as a means for communicating exploring just how at risk same-sex attracted men in Vietnam are. I am indebted to Bolton (as he is to Joe Carrier who used auto-ethnography in the 1970s to study Mexican gay men, see Carrier 1999) because he was dealing with participants of a similar background to that of my research and his writings have influenced me and this project in so many ways including the means by which he dealt with his fieldwork

in Belgium (Bolton 1995). Bolton received a Fulbright scholarship to research HIV and AIDS in Belgium and that provided him with the opportunity to explore gay male sexuality there. The impetus for his research was, as he puts it: “Cupid’s arrow” (Bolton 1995. p 144). Similarly, for me it was partially to do with desire; partly with safety, but more so it was to do with a genuine need for better HIV/AIDS awareness programs for those I had become close to. As for desire, never before had I experienced being desired as I had in Vietnam. I had never experienced men pursuing me for their sexual gratification; and it was a new, rewarding and an uplifting experience. It was hard to believe after years of things being the opposite that I was finally an erotic object of desire! This meant that I had no anxiety about being a man who was attracted to other men in Vietnam. Contrary to Kulick’s (1995) observation that many anthropologists conducting fieldwork feel anxious about possible rejection, I blossomed as an individual as a result of the acceptance by my friends of me and my sexuality. The key probably was that I wasn’t “doing ethnography” at the time. My initial contact with men was based on sex, so those men knew that I liked sex with men. But as time went on my straight friends knew too that I liked sex with men. Interestingly, when I told each of them about my sexuality, rather than reject me, I think it enhanced our friendships.

I had undertaken eleven months language training, three months in Australia and eight months in Vietnam. This added to my feelings of acceptance and safety too – and with elderly parents to consider it was only a nine hour plane trip home. And finally, I had a number of wonderful friendships that had grown in depth and intensity; some started out as sexual but by the time this research got on its way all had become platonic, ‘The bonds of love and affection we’d forged through sexual intimacy are enduring’ (Bolton: 1995 p 146): the friendships were so deeply meaningful to me that I worried for these people’s well-being (Ellis 2009), and not just the men I had met, I was concerned for countless other men that I had not met, nor would ever meet, because of the lack of informed and meaningful HIV/AIDS prevention and education campaigns for gay men.

The Many Selves

Auto-ethnography/memoir allows me to incorporate the many me's and my lived experience in a way that was not going to be seen as self indulgent, soppy or sleazy (perhaps not entirely!). As a researcher, I could not simply switch off my thinking or distance myself from those experiences which led me to the original research project which has evolved as this ethnography. As a community development (CD) worker, my initial training is in establishing relationships built out of trust and respect. Rapport building is important before one can deal with human/community needs in a meaningful and sustainable way. Community development acknowledges the lived experience of the CD worker. This lived experience is as important as are the lives of those we work with. I could not just play the role of the objective researcher who simply looked at my research findings from the data collected between the date of ethics approval and the completion of formal data collection and ignore all the different selves and everything that went before, not least because it was what I learned through my earlier lived experience that compelled me to undertake this project. It was in the erotic encounters and conversations narrated in *Approaching the Orient* that the reflexive enterprise commenced.

Ethics

Sex research, regardless of the methodology, is always controversial, and sex researchers historically have invariably been scrutinized and criticised as immoral (Allgeier and Alldier 1991; Brecher 1971; Humphreys 1970; Nardi 1994; Pomeroy 1972; cited in Bolton 1995 p 151). While I am not a sex researcher per se, my memoir is principally about sex and it will draw more attention because of its subject matter and as such requires a more careful discussion regarding the protection of the people, my friends, who are part of this ethnography.

Using the auto-ethnographical technique of memoir as the principal method for documenting lived experience has allowed me to protect my friends, with all the significance that I attach to 'friendship' from overt exploitation - friendships initially formed prior to the research - in ways that more traditional data collection processes

could not achieve to the same degree. By not deliberately mining my friends' lives in focus group discussions, one-on-one in-depth interviews or surveys - just to name the more common methods - the integrity of these friendships and the way they have developed and evolved are anonymously preserved. I acknowledge that certain aspects of my friends' lives have been documented here, but they have not been seen as, or used as, research subjects, and the people and contexts have been de-identified. This is in part achieved by shifting the focus of the narrative from my friends and their lives to me and my life.

Most of my friends don't share a common 'scene,' and because they mostly know each other through me alone the risk of anyone 'recognising' anyone else in my narratives (where names and details are already dissimulated) is very low. There is no organised gay community in Vietnam for me to be part of. There are some privately organised activities organised by gay men for gay men. There are any number of websites, coffee shops and social spaces where some gay men meet and socialise. But to say that there is a community that identifies as gay, as in Sydney, San Francisco, New York or London is misleading. So to be part of or to join a gay community in Vietnam was problematic, but also, to do so would have been alien for me. I am not part of the Melbourne gay scene, and certainly if there was one in Vietnam I am not sure that I would want to be part of it or even find myself made welcome. Rather, meeting same-sex attracted men, and at times having sex with them, took place in shared public spaces such as swimming pool showers, cinemas, a bus, discos, parks and streets, and in cyberspace.

It is important that I reiterate with a clear unambiguous statement regarding the sex that took place and documented in my auto-ethnography *Approaching the Orient*. This memoir was written retrospectively many years after the actual sexual acts had taken place. The sex that took place that is recorded in this memoir took place well before I had any idea about writing extensively about the experience. None of the sex that took place took place for data collection purposes (Bolton 1995; Murray 1995). It took place because either I or my sexual interlocutors had cruised one or the other for sex either in cyberspace or in real life face-to-face encounters, or one of us had initiated the sex in a public space. All sex that I was part of was consensual and

nobody was coerced or forced to participate; with the exception of myself being subjected to undue force, which I have written about.³⁵

The memoir came together as a mosaic, a piece here and some fragments there; by trawling through my memory remembering different people and sexual encounters and reflecting on what they meant or what meaning I ascribed to them at the time. In some instances, I looked at photographs from that period or of the people involved and, at other times I discussed certain events with the people I was writing about, seeking clarification on an event that took place. All events that are written about actually took place. Most events are documented as closely as possible to the correct time frame as I remember it, though one or two may be chronologically out of order, but this does not affect the story being told (Miller 2007). In the one instance where agreement cannot be had in the retelling of an event I have elected to report both versions; mine in the main body of the text and that of a friend's in an extensive footnote. I have chosen this as the most appropriate method to deal with this conundrum, because it deals with the little reported area of lesbian life in Ho Chi Minh City and, not because I want to privilege this friend's story over other friends' stories. In acknowledging the fraught nature of researching sex and sexuality there were a number of other ethical issues I was confronted with including truth and deception and lies and secrets.

Truth and Deception: Lies and Secrets

Fieldwork and ethnography both rely on relationships and rapport if the fieldworker is to be accepted by the community or group. This cannot be achieved if one holds secrets from those you wish to work with as Scheyvens, Nowak & Scheyvens put it, 'The subject of truth and deception cut at the core of the ethics of fieldwork...[there are] those who insist that it is essential to be absolutely honest with participants when you expect truthfulness from them' (2003 p 158). Don Kulick states:

³⁵ In a second incident, I did genuinely feel for my physical safety because I was being very heavily *manhandled* by somebody much stronger than me where, if I did not immediately leave the swimming pool showers, I thought I was going to be raped. In that instance I forcefully pushed the person away and escaped to a place where I felt safer.

...it is in the vacuum created between leaving off being one's self and attempting to be someone else that many ethnographers begin to become very aware of, and very unhappy with, the pretence of anthropological 'rapport'. Where exactly is the rapport, one might ask, in a set of disciplinary practices that seems to demand (in order to avoid rejection or expulsion) evasion, concealment, and lying about one's opinions, identities, and activities outside the field (these are the practices usually lurking behind the glib phrase 'adaptation') – even as it conditions anthropologists to resist it if local people do the same? (1995 p11).

As I have previously mentioned, I blossomed in my new environment where my friends knew about me and my particular sexual expression. With the exception of my Vietnamese language teacher, all my principal platonic relationships in Vietnam were established with these people being informed of my same sex attraction at a time that I thought was appropriate or when I was asked questions that needed an honest answer. I held nothing back from these people, and I never lied about who I was.

At no time did I hide or have I lied to any of my sexual interlocutors or to those people who became my friends about myself or what my plans had been. When I first arrived in Vietnam as a language student it was my intention to seek work in an NGO dealing with HIV/AIDS once my language skills improved. This was explained in English or, in Vietnamese as; *Tôi muốn làm việc sức khỏe cộng đồng HIV/AIDS ở Việt Nam* – I want to work in HIV/AIDS community health in Vietnam. All my principal friendships in Vietnam are of seven to nine years in the making. With the exception of my Vietnamese teacher- she knew I was not married and I had no children, she never asked why I was not married, but she did enquire of each of my landlady's if Vietnamese women ever visited me - all my friends, straight or gay, they all know that I am gay or prefer men to women sexually.³⁶ I held nothing back from anyone and I never misled them about who I was.³⁷

³⁶ I don't mean acquaintances here, I mean friendships. People I felt meant something more to me than just knowing them or I felt I meant something to them, people whose company I enjoyed and they appeared to enjoy mine. Where I am part of a family it is that single person with whom that friendship is built upon who knows about my sexual attraction and I am aware of theirs. My openness does not extend to include their whole family, for obvious reasons.

³⁷ However this level of *openness* did not apply to all people. For example, I left it to my friends to tell me what I should say to their family or friends should they ask me about; 'Where is my wife and or how many children I had?'

All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, locations have been altered and where possible, any traceable profession has been changed so as to protect the identity of individuals. Those men whom I just had sex with and did not form any ongoing friendship with will be unaware of what I have written about. As I had met these men independently of my established friends they would not know these men either. Furthermore, as neither them, nor I, have any means of knowing where or how to find each other, nobody else will be able to identify them from my story. And of course the nature of the my research both as it was originally approved by my ethics committee and, now with this new approach, meant that it had to be low key.

Keeping it Low Key

By keeping the research low key and away from official apparatchiks in the local People's Committee and the National Government meant that I must be cautious with how I dealt with my subject matter. This has/had been in the forefront of my mind for the entire journey this research has taken. In 2004 my MA by research application was accepted and since then my project has travelled along its own journey; now as a PhD project – so too have my life and my research topic somewhat merged into one. As the research travelled its path, it became important that it remain low key, outside of official domains, away from official gatekeepers who could or would control or influence what I was doing. It was important for my friends' health and well being and I did not want to draw attention to them, nor did I want to draw attention to my research and risk having it shut down because of its sensitive nature. Unlike Catherine Earl who had her original research in Vietnam on ethnic minorities – a sensitive topic - modified by officials who thought her work created 'difficulties and dangers' (Earl 2007 p 55) - Earl describes how some of her fieldwork was arranged by and undertaken with an accompanying official or academic - I wanted to avoid a similar fate and just wanted to be left to establish rapport with the broader community and specifically to connect with men who desired men so I could understand their human condition (Ellis 2009).³⁸ 'Official' involvement in my case was likely to end up making my research

³⁸ Interestingly, in a number of discussions with Vietnamese, in English, they used the English word "condition" to explain a period of time where they experienced difficulty; be it health, finance or love.

impossible, a common dilemma for researchers working in countries ruled by single party dictatorships.

Rapport

Building rapport through dialogue that is cognisant of power differentials can achieve much insight into community issues and problems. This critical awareness is crucial to contributing to positive social change. As a community development worker, as a social scientist, and, as a friend this is what I want to achieve. As Ellis (2009 p 15) proudly states 'I care deeply that my stories have the potential to impact and improve social conditions'. I am trained in a range of community building skills, and when I reflect on my previous professional life I realise that is exactly what I had been doing for the previous twenty years before returning to study: building rapport with individuals, with the express purpose of addressing their needs. But, also running a small business, I could not have attained recognition as an enlightened employer if I was not sensitive to the needs of my staff who were always treated as people with individual needs. People have always been important to me. Working with people collaboratively in any context requires a reflexive approach to achieve suitable and worthwhile outcomes, but also being aware of power differentials and privilege has assisted me in both building rapport and situating myself amongst many others.

Power and Privilege

I had considerable internal tension to negotiate with this new approach to my thesis. Was I using my friends and our shared experiences to advance myself professionally? What was it that my friends would get from this enterprise? Would what I wrote about ever lead to health communication that was accessible to same sex attracted men? Another dilemma I had to confront and work through was with notions of democratic processes in the research enterprise and how to ensure my friends had a say in what I was doing when they have no first hand experiences of democracy in any form within local, provincial or nationwide political structures, but also in an age status society I had to be cognizant of being older than all my friends and how they would

interact with me because of that. But here was the contradiction, while my Vietnamese friends may not have participated in democratic voting processes to elect a government as we know it in the West, they actively discuss and negotiate what is happening around them; where and what to eat, what family members will buy, what movie to see. While none of these negotiations were particularly serious in nature, they would be discussed at length, and what seemed important was not what was being decided but the process by which it was being decided. Everybody had a say and nobody felt they could not contribute their opinion or idea. I was also becoming used to being included in the process.

At the same time, I could not escape the fact that I am a white, tertiary educated, middle-class man, privileged in so many ways that my friends are not. I was perceived to be rich, which by Vietnamese standards I was. Just flying to Vietnam required me to pay an amount of money that to many, in the first couple of years I was in Vietnam, was unimaginable, let alone how somebody could have that amount of idle cash. Prior to writing the auto-ethnography my lived experience in Vietnam was just that, an experience in the past, a memory. But now, since its inception, the words that give shape to the memoir also give shape to the experience. While my friends' faces are etched in my memory, they are faces that most readers will never see; yet I wonder in a way if they now have words which paint a picture of our encounters nearly as accurately as photographs could.

Reciprocity – Giving Something Back

Reciprocity is a crucial component of anthropology; in community development it is called giving something back. "The practice of ethnography relies upon the exchange of lives, selves, and voices. It is about personal communications, face-to-face interactions and encounters" (Coffey 1999 p 130) One of the principles by which I live my life is about being generous to those I care about and I don't mean just in a monetary sense, I mean generosity. I live my life by demonstrating what I expect from others. Some people may refer to this understanding of myself as being sanctimonious; however I prefer to call this living ethically or with integrity. I don't wish to hurt people by what I do or, by what I say, hence I am careful with the words

I use. I willingly share ideas, knowledge and experiences. If I agree to do something, I do it or seek to make suitable alternative arrangements if I cannot. I don't forget what I have agreed to and I turn up on time. I never cancel one appointment only to replace it with somebody else's appointment. I offer assistance where I can and I ask for help when I need it. In the Vietnamese context living my life like this has given me extraordinarily wonderful and deep two way friendships. I have used my Vietnamese networks to secure job interviews for my friends. On another occasion a friend took me along to an interview for a new job he was applying for.³⁹ At times I have provided written references in support of my friends. All of my Vietnamese friends have access to those members of my family and my Australian friends who have come to Vietnam, as I have had and continue to have access to their families when I am in Vietnam.

From time to time I have lent small amounts of money to all of them when they were in dire need to meet a bill, as I have done with friends or family in Melbourne. Two friends now own their own apartments and will not countenance that I stay anywhere else other than with either one of them in their homes. To my initial embarrassment, one friend told members of my family that meeting me had changed his life forever, and on another occasions told his friends that he respects me as he does his father. This does not, in itself, give me permission to write about them, far from it, however, it does provide a small snapshot about our friendships which are two-way, meaningful, organic and ethical. These friendships have been built from trust and respect; not bought or traded for. Another friend told me this year that when he gets married I "must come and stand by his side". These are not comments from people who think that they owe me something or because they need to keep in with me. These are from people I care about and, they care about me. In Ellis's terms relational ethics and ethics of care are important to consider with our friends for whom we write about (Ellis 2009 p 308). These people are my friends and their wellbeing is my primary concern. Reciprocity has assisted in the development of these friendships and reciprocity has cemented the bonds between us because of this shared experience. Reciprocity is a good part of the concern that has led me to want to make

³⁹ I sat through the entire interview process in the same room as the interview was being conducted. Midway through the interview the interviewer, a director of a large state owned corporation, asked me some questions about me which had nothing to the job my friend applied for and ultimately got.

what I have learned available to those able to make a difference in our understandings of their lives and make their lives safer.

The Foreigner's Folly

By establishing memoir as being a legitimate and worthwhile method to document an experience-rich narrative on gay sex in the Vietnamese context, I hope that with my memoir and with this chapter, I have been successful in avoiding what Stephan O Murray describes as being the white man's folly in thinking that sex with a few of the natives means one has all the answers. Murray states:

From experiences with young persons experimenting outside their usual world, foreigners easily overestimate the sexual role flexibility in a culture. Being foreign in a society and in 'intimate contact' with one or more of the natives, alien observers may not realise that their sexual partners in a significant sense are not playing by the usual rules of their sexual culture (Murray 1996 p 242).

Murray's observation is an apt warning and I have avoided framing my analysis in terms of cultural mapping. My ethnography demonstrates that rather than claiming what I did with my sexual interlocutors as definitive for identity-making or marking, I have described behaviour that puts people at risk of HIV infection, and by doing so I have established in it a framework whereby I can explore that risk.

Conclusion

While memoir as a method has provided the perfect vehicle to retrospectively document certain events in a period of my life in Vietnam, the memoir also better protects my friends and our friendship by shifting the focus of attention away from them and onto my life. The ethnography shows the slow development and careful conceptualisation of the concerns and the personal commitment to the framing of my research. Autoethnography has advanced the use of personal experience through embedded theory, as well as linking theory with personal commitment in throwing light on what has been poorly researched to date. The difficulties addressed in this chapter

also form a bridge between the creative non-fiction of the *Approaching the Orient* narrative and the discussion that follows of health promotion in general, and more particularly what we can learn from publicly displayed HIV/AIDS health promotion campaigns in Ho Chi Minh City.

Chapter 6

Same-sex attracted men & publically displayed HIV/AIDS billboards in HCMC

“... the terrain of health promotion programmes is replete with pejorative cultural codes and meanings anchored in Eurocentric and Westernised ideology”.

Collins Airhihenbuwa 1995, p. xii

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the interdisciplinary nature of this research and the different approaches taken with the construction of this thesis. It might usually be expected that methodological considerations be positioned earlier in a thesis, but after composing the autoethnographic narrative *Approaching the Orient* I felt my thoughts on method would function more effectively placed between the narrative and the stories that emerge from less personal discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS in Vietnam. In articulating the experiences that preceded this research I give voice to stories and encounters that may never get told otherwise; positioning memoir under the overarching cover of auto-ethnography provided an appropriate mechanism to retrospectively reconstruct an ethnography. Furthermore, the previous chapter provides a metaphorical bridge between the reflexive nature of the memoir with what follows: a more critical and grounded section of this thesis.

In this chapter I offer a close readings of HIV/AIDS billboards used in four different health campaigns that have appeared in the public domain in Ho Chi Minh City over an eight year period. Their form and content highlight my central concern that a lacuna exists where no worthwhile HIV/AIDS information for same-sex attracted men can be found in these public health discourses. Furthermore, I move further into a critical discussion on public health communication theory as it relates to HIV/AIDS prevention and education campaigns, specifically in the Vietnamese context.

While I review these billboards I was drawn into a parallel, albeit minor, story that runs concurrently to the three different health communication images explored in this chapter. The minor story, though in a different context a huge story to be told, is one of development. The early boards examined are hand painted sheet-metal that in turn are then nailed onto timber frames and then placed in public spaces. The later images are screen printed onto large synthetic surfaces that are stretched over metal frames. The progress made in how these representations in health communication are presented to the community equates to that of *doi moi*, that is, the opening up of the Vietnamese economy and community to modernity and international influences. A realisation that globalisation, however it maybe it explained, can no longer be denied entry to this country or be held captive at its various border control points. It appears now to be welcomed into the bosom of the communist state. Thus the older boards are at once old, outdated and reflect back to an era of closed borders while repelling and rejecting outside influence. The newer strategies are modern looking, employing modern technologies in their manufacture, embracing modern representations of community, post *doi moi* breaching boarder points, bringing new ideas, new people, outside influences. At once embracing modernity and, disrupting and challenging prevailing orthodoxies.

I will draw upon a number of authors who have subjected Vietnamese billboard art to critical examination, including the work of Taylor and Jonsson (2002), Drummond and Thomas (2003), McNally (2003) and Thaveeporn (1997) to frame current HIV/AIDS billboards as an extension of propaganda art. While works likes Douglas Crimp's (ed) 1988 volume *AIDS Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* and Crimp and Rolston's 1990 *AIDS demo/graphics* subject the lack of HIV/AIDS policy in the United

States of America to scrutiny, their insights are not yet readily applicable in Vietnam. The latter title is a direct call to action and demonstration, "...presented as a do-it-yourself manual, showing how to make propaganda work in the fight against AIDS" (Crimp and Rolston 1990 p. 13). The entire focus of this title is on *Act Up*, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, "a diverse, nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis" (Crimp and Rolston 1990 p. 13). No such groups exist in Vietnam and it is highly unlikely that any such group could exist or even be mobilised in Vietnam under the current polity.

Overview of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Vietnam

Vietnam recorded its first HIV infection in 1990 (Kaljee et al, 2005). Nationwide, as of 31 August 2007 there were 132,628 recorded cases of HIV; 26,828 recorded cases of AIDS; and 15,007 deaths due to AIDS. Ho Chi Minh City has the highest number of reported HIV cases in the country accounting for 17.32% of all reported HIV cases nationwide (Ministry of Health of Vietnam, 2008, *The Third Country Report on Following Up the Implementation to the Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS*). Official Vietnamese statistics reporting HIV infections record transmission and infection rates and only record heterosexual categories of infection or by injecting drug use (see table following title page of this thesis). Rates of infection as a result of anal sex between men, MSM or homosexual men are not provided in any substantive manner. While the UNAIDS 2008 report on HIV in Vietnam does report MSM these figures are not from official state reporting mechanisms or from official sentinel survey testing. HIV positive men in Vietnam are not asked if they fuck men or are fucked by men when tested within the state system. The UNAIDS figures are taken from independent research undertaken using small research samples in two cities only, and therefore Vietnamese same-sex attracted men who are HIV positive do not form any part of and cannot be identified in any national surveillance program. In fact, as McNally states, "[w]ith Vietnam's HIV prevalence rate remaining at under 0.1 per cent, most Vietnamese have minimal, if any, direct experience with the virus and so HIV and AIDS has little meaning for the everyday lived experience of most Vietnamese people" (2003 p. 113). This, coupled with their invisibility same-sex attracted men's lack of everyday

awareness that comes from seeing, nursing or grieving death as a result of AIDS, only emphasises their vulnerability.

The invisibility of same-sex attracted men in national surveillance testing for HIV is also reflected in their lack of representation in AIDS billboards. This deliberately ignores a whole group of Vietnamese men vulnerable to or at risk of infection. In the absence of any vaccine to protect people against the transmission of HIV and because there is no cure for it once a person becomes HIV positive, and as there is no cure for AIDS, the world's public health officials can only rely upon public health promotion strategies. These include safe-sex messages and clean needles - that is, harm reduction strategies - as a means of community and individual consciousness raising to the risks of infection through the sharing of injecting drug equipment or through unprotected sexual intercourse (fucking without a condom). In Vietnam HIV/AIDS is heterosexualised and portrayed as a disease affecting male and female sexual encounters or injecting drug users. These representations of the disease are also linked to other social evils such as alcohol, prostitution and gambling (see also McNally 2003). McNally also notes that '[w]ith the fading of the [social evils] campaigns, public billboards remain to provide constant reminder of what to guard against (2003, p115). While these older billboards remain to remind the Vietnamese populace, HIV/AIDS health promotion there only speaks to heterosexual men and women and injecting drug users.

Health Promotion

Communication and health as a field of study does not have a long genealogy. In the past 40 years interest has focused on the connection between communication and promoting health maintenance and/or disease prevention (Finnegan & Viswanath, 1990; Freimuth et al., 1993; Makoul 1991; Parrott et al., 1992 cited in Ratzan, Payne & Bishop, 1992). Research on and publication of "health communication" made its scholarly debut in a special section of *The Communication Yearbook 1*, published in 1977 (Ratzan et al., 1996 p 26). It is not in the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed and systematic account of or to anthologise 40 years of health communications research, suffice to say that the global HIV/AIDS crisis has coincided

to some extent with the development of health communication as a scholarly endeavour. Nevertheless, the first academic work published on HIV/AIDS and health communication did not appear until 1992 with the publication in the United States by Edgar, Fitzpatrick and Freimuth of their book *AIDS: A Communication Perspective* (Ratzan et al., 1996 p 26). Where health communication has its greatest influence is in 'its ability to change behaviour, which frequently translates into life over death' (Ratzan 1996 p. v). There can be nothing more important than to effectively communicate to all Vietnamese men, and gay men in particular, that unprotected penetrative sex places them at risk of deadly infection and that using condoms during sex virtually eliminates the risks of becoming infected with HIV.

Most HIV/AIDS prevention and education communication programs have been constructed around existing public health promotion theories that focus on 'social cognitive perspectives' (Edgar, Noar & Freimuth 2008 p 5) and are based on 'social psychology that emphasizes individualism' (Airhihenbuwa and Obregon 2000 p 5). These models include the health belief model, stages of change model, theory of reason action model, social Learning/cognitive theory (Leviton 1989 cited in Lear 1997: Glanz & Rimer 1995: Airhihenbuwa & Obregon 2000). Each of these models tend to have a number of different components to them such as 'the role of information, attitudes, and beliefs in an understanding of behaviours such as condom use' (Noar and Edgar 2008 p 5). Some of these frameworks are based on linear models of behaviour change. That is, after a planned and specific intervention in an at risk behaviour model a positive change will occur leading to a new behaviour that reduces risk of infection; such as wearing a condom when having sex or reducing the number of casual sex partners.

Another popular approach that underpins some HIV/AIDS awareness strategies has been based on fear arousal or fear appeals (Leviton 1989 cited in Lear 1997; Murray-Johnson, Witte, Liu, Hubbell, Sampson and Morrison 2001). Fear appeals/arousal is built on scaring its target audience into a new way of thinking and behaving. The message is if you inject drugs you will get AIDS and die or, fucking without a condom

will lead to becoming HIV positive and you will die.⁴⁰ Murray-Johnson et al state that in 'most published fear appeal studies, the threat focuses on individual outcomes or consequences' (2001 p336). Furthermore they cite research where few, if any, effective HIV-transmission preventive strategies exist that are sensitive to Asian cultural difference (Flora and Thoreson 1988; Michal-Johnson and Bowen 1992 cited in Murray-Johnson et al 2001 p 348) because these models have all been devised in Western settings.

What is common between these models is that they are conceived in Western language and medical terms, in largely white middle-class Anglo-North American/North Atlantic culture, valorising Western epistemological knowledge in the making and gaining of health knowledge and understanding behaviour which in turn suppresses cultural expression of non-Western people. This privileges Eurocentric biomedical approaches in dealing with health promotion and disease prevention (Airhihenbuwa 1995; Airhihenbuwa and Obregon 2000; Murray-Johnson et al 2001), although the word 'privilege' can only apply in a special sense where in effect that terminology makes interventions ineffective. Little, if any concession is given to providing space for culturally specific inputs that challenges Western hegemony in the construction of a discourse that, left unchallenged, forms a homogenous understanding of sex and sexuality that 'relies upon using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order' (Mudimbe 1988 cited in Airhihenbuwa 1995 p xii).

Western hegemony in the area of HIV/AIDS conspires with Western epistemological sexual ordering and regulation by placing homosexuality and heterosexuality at opposite ends of a binary which in-turn foists an identity label onto people dependent upon what they do in bed. It divides what people do between the sheets as either a homosexual or heterosexual act. It is axiomatic that such acts then label people with an identity that is either a homosexual or a heterosexual, irrespective of how the individual understands their sexuality. Those people who, to speak colloquially, occasionally bat for the other side or jump the fence are conveniently labelled as bisexual, as if this is all that is required in a globalised world for a universal

⁴⁰ The most recent example of the use of this approach has been seen where German health authorities designed a new AIDS awareness advertisement using a real-life-like image of Adolf Hitler fucking a woman, doggy style.

understanding of human sexuality in all its forms. This biomedical hegemony makes it easy to ascribe a level of risk of HIV infection according to one of only two categories of sexuality (Pisani 2008). This is supported by Western epidemiological explanations of patterns of HIV infection in either of these two groupings. But these global approaches ignore local contextual understandings of health and illness and sex/uality (Airhihenbuwa and Obregon 2000) because the focus is on sexual identity and ignores those sexual acts that place people most at risk of infection.

In respect to global HIV/AIDS prevention and education campaigns in general, current models are still conceived within the context of Western biomedical understandings of language, and specifically within Anglo-North American white middle-class culture in combination with Western gay men's experiences of the AIDS epidemic (Glanz & Rimer 1995. Airhihenbuwa & Obregon 2000. Murray – Jonson, White, Lie & Hubbell 2001), and as such they are based on a specific concept of the individual and of sex and sexuality "where a person who experiences same-sex desire undergoes categorisation, systemisation by a discourse that increasingly constitutes a self as always and only homosexual" (Myrick 1996 p 8). The corollary to this systemisation of identity as homosexual or, heterosexual for that matter, is the assumption in health promotion strategies that target audiences understand, or at least can decode, the message in all contexts. This is bound to be at odds with ways the individual is perceived and how sex/uality is played out in non-Western settings (Yodder 1997 cited in Airhihenbuwa & Obregon 2000) and what constitute sex in these settings. In the context of Vietnam, a lack of a broad demographic lived experience of AIDS as well as the state's construction of homosexuality as transvestism highlight the inherent weakness in the adoption of an uncritical or unreflexive approach to human sexuality and a concomitant failure in the global fight to address HIV/AIDS through effective communication.

As has often been stated, "an effective communication strategy is a critical component of the global effort in HIV/AIDS prevention and education" (Airhihenbuwa and Obregon 2001 p5), however if the ultimate aim of HIV/AIDS prevention and education is to reduce the number of infections then using Western biomedical models in non-Western settings to frame HIV/AIDS prevention and education messages, has

by and large failed, and failed dismally, to prevent the global spread of HIV. As a public health issue this is seen where people are still acquiring HIV. Annual global infection rates may have peaked in 1996 (UNAIDS 2009), but this belies regional or country specific increases. Worldwide the adoption of most country-wide health communications strategies to address the HIV epidemic do not address the regional nature of the disease and its demographic makeup because these models, and the bulk of the theory that supports them fails to take into account regional contexts. Health promotion models designed in one place are being re-applied into settings they were not designed for (Murray-Johnson et al., 2001). This is not to say there have not been individual country successes in reducing HIV infection rates, however globally people are still acquiring HIV (UNAIDS 2009). This is a complex issue and there is no one reason why infection rates are still increasing, but no country has stopped infections. Some have arrested high rates of infection and have witnessed declining rates of infection in certain groups; such as Australia's experience with injecting drug communities and gay men. However, there is a split between countries in the global North and South when dealing with rates of HIV infections: countries such as Australia, England, Canada, and the US have reduced infections dramatically, but not eradicated their rates of infection. While global rates of infection may have peaked, rates of infection are on the increase in gay men. In South East Asia, only Thailand and Cambodia have had any major sustained success in reducing rates of HIV in their broader communities.

HIV infections are still occurring in Asia; India, China, Thailand and Vietnam. Numerically and as a percentage of the population there is little change between recent UNAIDS reporting periods. The collation of comparative country-by-country HIV infections report like-for-like rates of infection around the world using UNAIDS protocols. The UN global updates show rates of HIV infection regionally and country-by-country, and it is clear the epidemic is different in every country and there can be wide variations within countries and cities. At the same time, there are big gaps in this reporting because rates of infection are shown by 'risk categories' such as heterosexual transmission, MSM, sex workers and injecting drug use, while not all countries include data on MSM infections. Heterosexual transmission figures are thus both distorted and

inaccurate because men are not asked about the actual sex behaviour they engaged in.

Various reasons are provided for those countries that don't report HIV infections in MSM or homosexuals. However, the major reason is their failure to collect data in the first place. In the case of Vietnam, Health Department officials claim that homosexuality is either non-existent or is only a Western import or fashion and is so small as to not be worth the bother of collecting data.⁴¹ I have already shown how the Vietnamese state uses local media to construct a version of homosexuality that is different to Western understandings of it. While there is an NGO MSM working group in Vietnam, there is no national HIV surveillance testing for MSM. In Vietnam this leads to all major public health HIV/AIDS education campaigns to focus on heterosexual transmissions or intravenous drug use. So whether one uses the global term of MSM or one talks of men who have anal sex, the heterosexualisation of HIV/AIDS programs leaves a known group of men with inadequate access to prevention and education messages that are already in the public domain in Ho Chi Minh City. In the case of Vietnam these HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns rely heavily on the use of road-side billboards. The billboards can be seen in a variety of public places and most campaigns have been based on scaring people along the lines of the fear arousal/fear appeal model of health promotion outlined above.

Vietnamese Billboards

The work of Taylor and Jonsson (2002) and Vasavakul (1997) has established propaganda art/ists as being important parts/players in official Vietnamese state controlled communication strategies spanning many decades. Vasavakul shows through an analysis of three decades of war propaganda art how the state skilfully plays up to a range of nationalist objectives. Many propaganda artists had originally trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine. Post 1954 they were influenced by movements in Soviet and Chinese propaganda art (Taylor and Jonsson 2002 p 242) - which I also demonstrate later in this chapter. Where "...propaganda art is meant to

⁴¹ I was told this in an informal conversation I had with a doctor who was part of the HCMC HIV/AIDS Standing Committee when I asked why no health promotion addressed MSM.

contain a message... the intended audience... is always to some extent abstract or imaginary" (Taylor & Jonsson 2002 p. 236) and as one Vietnamese poster artist has reported "you have to paint so that people don't have to look twice" (*New York Times* 14 Nov 2000 p. B2, cited in Taylor and Jonsson 2002 p. 236). So billboards are skilfully drafted with simple messages speaking to an imaginary audience.

As the authors cited above have shown, publicly displayed billboards play a significant part and are an important medium in communicating messages to Vietnamese people. This medium is used by a number of different departments within the State to communicate to the masses. The boards vary in size and shape, and they can be found secured on fences, electricity power poles or buildings throughout the city and by the road in the countryside. They communicate messages relating to campaigns as diverse as family planning, hazards of overhead powerlines, national holidays, significant anniversaries that promote patriotism. These include pride in the ongoing struggle, such as the 50 year anniversary of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, or the battle of August Eighth. Anything to do with Uncle Ho's (Ho Chi Minh) birth, death, time leading the party, or signing treaties are all recognised and celebrated in publically displayed billboards. The sheer numbers of these boards and their size would indicate more money is spent promoting these patriotic causes than is spent promoting HIV/AIDS prevention in the same way.

The Vietnamese Communist Party issued guidelines relating to HIV/AIDS in 1992. Based on themes of moral panic these guidelines emphasise "prevention and control... [where] everybody maintains [a] clean, healthy and faithful lifestyle and self conscience prevention of drug use and prostitution" (McNally 2003, p. 117). These themes are still seen in billboards around the country.

Condoms

The first time I can recall seeing a billboard promoting condom use was in January 2001. It was advocating the use of condoms for family planning purposes and not HIV/AIDS prevention. It portrayed a young happy heterosexual couple; married I presume, with two children in the foreground. Above the hand painted image of the

couple was a jolly looking, dancing condom. This board was one amongst several other billboards promoting different messages on the roadside on the way to the Cu Chi tunnels, and were located on an intersection of two roads. Cu Chi is a rural rice growing area and is about sixty kilometres from HCMC. Here three boards were placed side-by-side on the side of the road. They could only be seen from one direction.

HIV/AIDS

Over my time in Vietnam there have been several different public health campaigns using billboards alerting the community to the risks of HIV/AIDS. I don't have exact commencement dates for three campaigns, however the periods I refer to are circa 2001, 2004, 2006. A fourth campaign commenced in HCMC in February 2008. Like other types of billboards HIV/AIDS billboards can be found in a number of different locations. Some have been located on high traffic volume intersections, others on intersections with less traffic flows. Some have been secured to perimeter fencing on building sites and others have been seen close to Universities. What has been common in each campaign and the different styles and messages has been the sparseness in the distribution of these boards. I travelled widely and freely around much of greater HCMC from Tu Duc to District Five, and District Eleven to District Seven regularly and most other districts in-between and HIV/AIDS prevention billboards are not readily seen in any regularity or frequency.

While I was contemplating what it was to be gay in Vietnam and how same-sex attracted men made sense of these publicly displayed HIV/AIDS billboards I soon realised that there was nothing of any relevance in these campaigns at all for these men. In-fact all HIV/AIDS billboards I came across were devoid of any meaningful information for any member of the community. In one instance the boards linked HIV/AIDS with an existing campaign running in the broader community against social evils that included drugs and narcotics, prostitution, gambling and excessive alcohol consumption. These campaigns were based on fear and directly linked AIDS to social exclusions with the message that AIDS equals death. A second campaign was ambiguous and conveyed no discernable health message at all, the third campaign was soft and gently encouraged people to be tested for HIV and the fourth campaign

focused on awareness raising. None of these boards referred to condoms or sex and none of the campaigns alerted people to the risk of infection from unprotected or unsafe sex. In fact one could have been excused for believing that there was no relationship between HIV and sex.

Circa 2001: MA TUY – Narcotics/Drugs

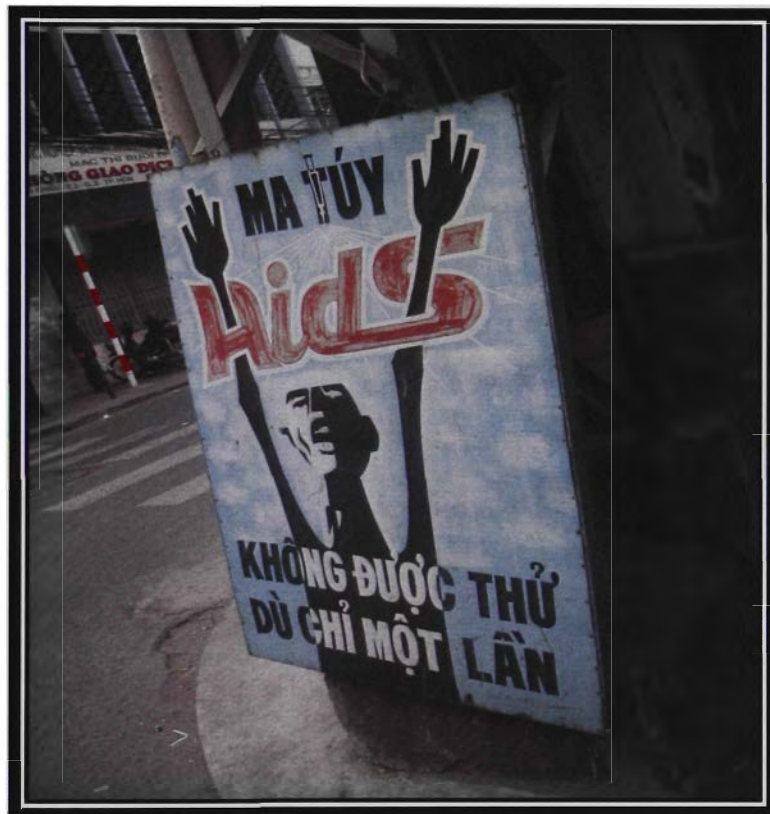


Plate 1: Old metal board on Nguyen Dinh Chieu St. District 3 HCMC.

The billboard reproduced in Plate 1 was located just off Cao Thang street in Nguyen Dinh Chieu street in District Three. In 2001 and 2002 I walked passed this board twice a week when I went to teach conversational English to two sisters at their home. The board was approximately three feet wide by five feet high and was secured, at ground level to an electricity power pole. It consisted of a single piece of sheet metal nailed to a timber frame, and the nail heads were rusted. The board is hand painted with a faded pale blue background, or maybe the artist wanted a deliberately distressed look. The image painted on the boards is of a human torso with its arms reaching out, upwards. Bracket by the palms of the two out-stretched arms is the word *MA TÚY* - narcotics. The T in the first letter of the second word is used to form a hypodermic syringe. The syringe is pointing downwards, protruding from the top of the letter T is the syringe plunger. Fanning out from the tip of the syringe are a number of white lines, giving the effect of something coming out of the needle tip. In red the word *AidS* is spelt – with the A and S in upper case and the i and d in lower case - across the outer limits of those white lines. Like pulling a singlet on, one arm of the figure is threaded through the upper cavity in the capital letter A, the second arm is woven from under the lower tail of the S and out, to appear as if it is traversing the middle section of the letter, it is like the arms are wearing or caught in the word *AidS*. Just like the moment before you pull the singlet over your head to wear it, the word *AidS* rests just above the knobby elbows as a threat, just before it encloses your body where you will wear it until you die.

This image is quite haunting because between the lower parts of the arms - that is beneath the elbows, that join to the shoulder of this human figure is the elongated and distorted outline of the figure's head. The human figure is black in colour, however the head is coloured in both black and white. White is used in reverse contrast to give the head its defining features; ear, eyes, nose and mouth. The neck is elongated and there is a small but obvious triangular piece showing white, that could be read as either a cut or as the Adam's apple. Across the figure's torso appear the words *KHÔNG ĐƯỢC THỬ DÙ CHỈ MỘT LẦN* - Don't try even just once - printed in two rows.

The human figure in Plate 1 is of indeterminate gender, but I think it is meant to be male. The elongation of the figure highlights emaciation, as do the knobby elbows

that protrude from the outstretched arms. These arms are knitted into the red painted word *AidS* with the inference being that it is AIDS coming out of the syringe. The two palms of the hands embracing the word *MA TÚY*. This is a frightening image. The use of a one dimensional figure rendered starkly in black, red and white to heighten fear surrounding HIV and AIDS. Before even understanding what the text said I knew what was intended: use drugs and you will get AIDS and die. The iconography states that when you inject drugs you are injecting AIDS into your blood/body. It is also worth noting that the figure is not clearly representing a Vietnamese man or woman, a message that fits with beliefs relating to AIDS and foreign corruption of a moral Vietnam.

As Taylor & Jonsson and Vasavakul show the iconography used here is more in line with Soviet imagery. Hand painted, the facial features are blockish and large, certainly not Asian. I can only guess that the piece missing from the neck in fact represents a syringe injecting its contents into an artery in the neck; a common injecting route in Vietnam. As white is the symbol of mourning in Vietnam I wonder if using white to paint the lines that flow from the syringe that embrace the word *AidS* is meant to symbolically link death with drug use and AIDS. Certainly the use of red for the word *AidS* conveys blood and knitting the arms through the word implies injecting AIDS into your arms, all of which is meant to scare people into not using. Also interesting is the inappropriate/inaccurate use of the acronym used by Western medical professionals and AIDS workers as *AidS* and not AIDS. We might also wonder why this English use of the acronym has been used and not SIDA, which is the French and Vietnamese acronym used for AIDS and also why it is that HIV is not used because. HIV is what we want to protect people from acquiring. My final impression of this billboard as a viewer looking at the image face on, in fact, is that this figure is reaching out to the passer-by, crying out for help but perhaps more poignantly also being beyond help. This example is an exemplar of the fear appeal/ fear arousal model of health promotion.

Circa 2004: World AIDS Day 1-12

The billboard in Plate 2 on page 200 is one I saw regularly. It was located on a fence of a hospital in Tan Binh District on Lac Long Quan Street and there are three

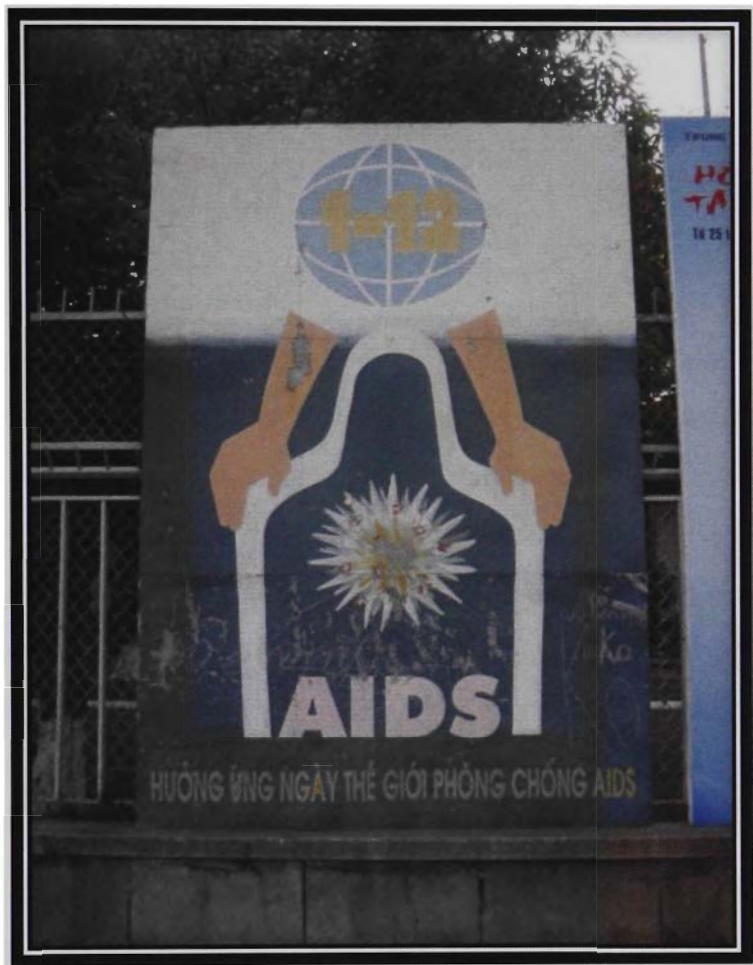
other billboards alongside it. This board is larger than the previous board, is at about four feet wide by seven or eight feet high. It is secured to a wrought iron fence incorporating cyclone chain mesh. The board rests on the three-foot concrete ledge of the fence and is secured to the wrought iron fence frame. People sit on this ledge when waiting to catch the bus or to use the ATMs located just a few feet away. The board is worn and scratched at a height level with a person's mid-back; this also at the height of school backpacks on students' backs. On this particular board there was a little graffiti. This board gives the first impression that one is looking from above; down from some transcendental vantage point.

The upper one-third of this board is painted white and the lower two-thirds in a grey/blue, the two colours fading into each other where they meet. This gives the effect of clouds on a horizon. The billboard consists of three pieces of sheet metal secured onto the timber frame with nails. However these nails must have been made with an alloy or have been galvanised because they are not rusty (which suggests this billboard may be newer than the first board). Positioned in the centre high in the upper white section of the board is an image of a globe of the world. This can be identified because both the longitudinal and the latitudinal lines that criss-cross the sphere give shape to a north-south axis and east-west axis. The globe is painted pale blue and the axial lines are painted white. Printed in large cream coloured numerals in the centre of the globe and in block numerals is '1-12', the date for World AIDS Day. Extending down from the globe and reaching down is a pair of arms. At the intersecting point at the top of the arms a white line is partially orbital giving the effect of short shirt sleeves, but also giving a three dimensional appearance.

The arms are pointed down. The hands are resting on a white outline of what could be a shroud. The shroud is only given shape by a white line. The palms are resting on the shoulders of the shape, as the white line moves away from the hands down the board they come together ever so slightly giving shape to a corpse. Something similar to a CSI crime scene: A chalked outline of where a corpse has been found on a road, or perhaps what we can see is an orderly wheeling a corpse out of a morgue locker. Where one would imagine locating the heart of a human in the corpse figure is a white image of something that looks as if it is exploding, but to the knowledgeable eye

perhaps recognisable as the HIV virus, at least as it was initially represented. Under this image and within the sides of the corpse figure is the word AIDS, painted in pink. Across the bottom of the board in yellow is the message *HƯỚNG ỨNG NGÀY THẾ GIỚI PHÒNG CHỐNG AIDS* - Office of AIDS Supports World AIDS Day.

Plate 2: Hand painted image on sheet metal nailed to timber frame



There is nothing about the featureless and genderless grey silhouette of the victim that speaks of life. The only feature “it” has, the only identity “it” has, is by way of the spiked ball of the HIV virus (not that HIV is mentioned in the billboard)... a person is replaced by an infection. What was human is now mere shadow; painted grey it is not just featureless, it is lifeless. Any care that might have been expressed through the strong support for global action (the arms) is also rendered anonymous... and given the total absence of any reference to Vietnam the text already cited appearing at the bottom of the billboard could even be interpreted as saying Vietnam supports the global struggle against AIDS without even acknowledging its impact on Vietnamese men and women, or even its presence in Vietnam. While this billboard is visually a well

balanced and symmetrical piece of work, symbolically I wonder at the significance of placing the image of the HIV virus or exploding cell where we should find the human heart. The search for love in Vietnam is a ubiquitous pursuit. And whatever this image symbolises a popular reading could also be seen as an exploding heart, the end of love. Get AIDS and it is the end of love. Once again this board's focus, while gesturing toward care, still resorts to fear to convey its message, as opposed to the next two boards where a quite different approach has been taken.

Circa 2006: *Chân Trời Mới* - Sunrise

The next two boards are more contemporary in a whole range of ways. I first saw them in late 2006. They could be found on several major arterial roads and several intersections in District One of HCMC. I have no recollection that these boards are in any other district in Saigon other than in District One, but that does not mean they are not. They are large – about ten feet wide and six feet high. The front/surface is a synthetic material resembling canvas. The message and images are printed onto the surface of this synthetic material. The technology behind this is modern and computer generated, and requires a large machine to print. Once printed the canvas is stretched over a frame and secured. The surface is taut and that makes the entire structure rigid. These boards are then secured to solid structures, such as, concrete fences or walls. The most prominent location in District One where these boards could be seen was Le Lai St near Pham Ngu Lao Street and also in Nguyen Thi Minh Khai (NTMK) street secured to the wall of the South Vietnamese/ Reunification Presidential Palace.



Plate 3: Modern printing on stretched acrylic canvas

These boards are eye catching if only because of their size and the use of images of large images of real people. There were two versions, one with two women (Plate 3), one with two men (Plate 4), while the text is exactly the same in both. The boards are

predominantly yellow ochre in colour with a black band at the bottom where the agency checking for HIV is announced.

In both boards two thirds of the board is taken up by two human figures. We see one person full torso and face, smiling, displaying perfectly formed teeth, as they look into the eyes of somebody standing facing them. All have perfect (airbrushed) complexions. We cannot see the face of this person, but they are the same gender as the figure we see clearly. These are clean and well groomed people: the men with neat haircuts, the women wearing their hair up – feminine, Confucian and very Vietnamese. In photograph 3, the main female figure – maybe a health worker- has her hand gently holding the other figure's upper arms as the minor character, the patient rests her hand on the opposite wrist of the health professional (there is something about the comforting gesture, the reassuring holding of the shoulders or upper arms, that is reminiscent of the image in Plate 2). In photograph 4, the main male character – the health professional- appears to be placing his hand on the other figure's shoulder. All figures are dressed in white. In each case both main characters are wearing their shirt/blouse open at the neck. Who is the patient and who is the doctor or nurse in these representations? I think the health worker has to be the person offering the reassuring hand on the shoulder or arm of the figure we cannot see. The faceless

images differ in that the male appears to be wearing a T-shirt and female a short sleeve blouse. Nevertheless, both versions establish a hierarchy that implies just and ethical care for persons who are... we can't be sure. Perhaps there are other clues.

In the upper right corner of each board is located an orange coloured circle of the rising sun and its rays. The name of the health centre/service is also located in this space *Chân Trời Mới: Trung tâm Tư vấn Sức khỏe Cộng đồng* - Sunrise Community Health Centre. Just under this is a telephone icon and number. The human figures are photographic images of real life people. However what I find puzzling about these images is the fact that the human figures shown on these boards are looking directly,

maybe even trustingly into each other's eyes.



Plate 4: Billboard secured to fence on NTMK St. Traffic zooms past

In Vietnam unless people are social equals or at the very least well known to each other this simply does not happen. Looking somebody direct in the eye is a form of disrespect: It is

impolite. For women it is not as pronounced a phenomenon, but men seem to adhere to this social convention more acidulously. That there is such an obvious gaze from the dominant figure in each billboard reinforces the sense that they are experts offering comfort, and perhaps even that they are agents of justness of the Vietnamese state's care. The text of the board reads: *HIV THẮC MẮC? TÂM SỰ CÙNG AI?* – Questions about HIV? Who to talk to? This is followed by *Khi tư vấn chúng tôi là chuyên gia* – During consultation we are specialists, and *Khi trò chuyện chúng tôi là tri kỷ* – During informal conversation we are good friends. Under this text is a black band running across the bottom of the board that contains the sentence: *Dịch vụ tham vấn và xét*

nghiệm HIV Miễn Phí thuộc Ủy Ban Phòng Chống AIDS – TP Hồ Chí Minh –
 Consultation service and HIV check are provided for free by Ho Chi Minh City AIDS Prevention Committee.

As I noted earlier, these boards were found on the perimeter wall of the Reunification Palace located on NTMK street near the intersection with Nam Ky Khoi Nghia (NKKN) street. NTMK street carries tens of thousands of vehicles, mainly motorbikes, in an easterly direction out of District One each hour. People going from District One to Thanh Da, Tu Duc, Bien Hoa, Dalat, Vung Tau and Hanoi all head out on this road. NKKN street funnels all airport traffic into the city in a southerly direction only. However whatever traffic flows along NKKN street into the city, it is hard to imagine that these people could see or read these boards because of where they have been placed. It is difficult to see that many people would have the opportunity to concentrate on what is hanging off a fence as they travel past at 40 kph on their way home after long hours of toil, which leaves foot traffic; and there is not much of that in this area. Twenty metres away are some serviced apartments and a little further away is a high school. Once again I don't believe that either of those two sites provides the target audience for these boards.

However, at night, in the shadows of the trees and power poles that are cast across the footpath in front of the high school fence you will find some 'perfumed flowers of the night'⁴², *gà* – chickens, prostitutes; only as many as the shadows allow, six or eight. Their customers mount the wide footpath on their motorbikes and cruise between these perfumed flowers negotiating whom to pick. Still, I doubt if it is these women and/or their customers who are the target audience, because while this nocturnal scene does occur opposite the Reunification Palace perimeter fence it is well away and out of sight of the boards, in the darkest stretch of the street.

In interpreting these images I am left with the idea that these people are an idealised representation of what it is to be Vietnamese, healthy well groomed young

⁴² Many straight men I spoke to referred to female prostitutes in more polite terms, as perfumed flowers of the night or flowers of the night, later when I had become more acquainted with these men they would use the short and more pejorative *gà* meaning chicken. My gay friends referred to male prostitutes as callboy, or money boy in English and were referred to in Vietnamese as *vịt*, meaning duck.

urban workers/professional people with no facial blemishes, and perfect teeth with cheeks that appear to be airbrushed, pale – modern, progressive, reliable. Maybe the message is to be read as that everyday people like you are at risk of HIV so don't be scared to ask somebody or talk to a health professional. It is free. The female image with her short sleeve blouse with her hair up could also be appealing to the large number of young women who have migrated to the city to work in the new urban processing zones, but these economic processing zones are over twenty kilometres away from District One. The male images ignore manual workers and factory workers, building labourers and can hardly be identified with Vietnamese MSM, homosexual men or gay men.

The board that is located on Le Lai Street, secured onto the side fence of an unfinished commercial complex, really only interacts with people who either stop at the intersection on their motorbikes or in cars or with people who are milling around the general area. Because they are located off the main north-south thoroughfare of Dai Lo Ham Nghi St, this location cannot be deemed to be engaging with the huge traffic flows on this particular road. My guess is that they must be attempting to engage with the local bus and taxi drivers and/or the street hawkers who frequent this area. The placement of these boards also precludes them from engaging with the large number of Vietnamese who live in or frequent the backpacker area because those locals access the Pham Ngu Lao area via a different route.

January 2008: 15/1

I first noticed the boards which are the subject of Plate 5 in Can Tho City in January 2008. Can Tho City is the largest city in the Mekong Delta region in southern Vietnam. It is the economic, transport and education hub for this region. In HCMC a board with the same image and message was erected a month later in February onto the perimeter fence of a huge development site in District Eleven. I rode my motorbike on one or all of these four roads many times each day during my stay in Vietnam in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009, seeing the buildings take shape. The second location I came across one of these boards was behind Post office Number 1, near the Notre Dame Cathedral off *Hai Bà Trưng* Street. It was secured onto a fence abutting a little

street that serves no real function other than as a short cut to beat traffic jams and as an access road to a military hospital. Initially I thought people attending the hospital may have been the target audience, however when I returned to HCMC in February 2009 this board was still there but behind the fence was a large high-rise retail and commercial development site.

These boards are made in the same manner as the Sunrise Clinic boards using the same modern, and expensive, technique of computer generated photographic images of real life people printed onto a synthetic surface. Despite this similarity, these boards



Plate 5: One in series of boards located on several building sites in HCMC

convey their message in a very different manner. In comparison to the earlier boards there is a more economical use of words and greater emphasis is placed on the viewer bringing together three images. Standing in front of this board it is easy to see that it is in six

parts. There are four quadrants, a banner at the base of the board and a clock in the centre of the board at the central axis of the four quadrants. The top left quarter of the board has a photo of a very handsome young man with a big smile showing gleaming white teeth. This man has his right arm tightly wrapped around the waist of an equally attractive young women (is she a beer girl, or the colloquially called *bia-ôm*, beer-hug?) drawing her body into contact with his in an intimate way. His eyes are closed. Half of this bar image is shaded in a red glow; the other half in refracted white light.

Apparantly at a bar or table, only the top halves of the man and woman’s bodies are visible. The remainder of the image, including that of the woman, is out of focus.

Positioned in front this good-looking couple are two large cocktails sitting on a bar. Both drinks look to be partially consumed.

In the bottom right corner is another image of the same man but on his own. We are now brought closer to him and only his shoulders, upper chest and face are visible. His eyes are wide open and he is looking slightly upward, gazing, staring away from himself, mouth open; he in shock. The scene behind him is blurred and predominately white. In fact his image is back lit with a bright light. The female figure is nowhere to be seen. He has gel in his hair. His handsomeness is heightened.

The other two quadrants of this board are white. The words and numerals of the textual message are in red. In the top right quadrant in the largest print of the entire board appears “15/1” and then “*cứ 15 phút tại Việt Nam thêm 1 người nhiễm HIV*” – Every 15 minutes another person contracts HIV in Vietnam. In the bottom left quadrant appear the words “*Bạn sẽ làm gì để bảo vệ mình?*” - What can you do to protect yourself?

In the centre of the board is the clock with a grey rim. Inside the clock the black hour hand points up to the bar scene, the red minute hand points across to the image of the male alone. This reinforces the before-after narrative of the images; in time, perhaps in no time at all, it seems to say, loose living can have dire consequences. Across the bottom of the board is a grey band with words and icons that are easily recognised by those familiar with any of the new forms of digital media or entertainment systems as play and stop icons. The play arrow in green is matched with text that reads *vui có chừng* – enjoy yourself to the limit, and the stop square in red is matched with text that reads *dừng đúng lúc* – Stop at the right time. Positioned at the bottom right of the board are the funding agencies branding/trademarks: PSI and USAID – Population Services International and United States International Aid Agency.

The first of these billboards I was to observe was in Can Tho City, the board was secured onto a cyclone fence near a University. It was Tết 2008, and I was returning to HCMC from visiting Lợi's in-laws and family.⁴³ My eye was caught immediately to the

⁴³ Lợi and his wife had to leave the HCMC home they shared with her extended family this Tết because a very high ranking government official was to visit there on the first day of Tết to

colours and size of these boards. At first, I did not know that it was an HIV/AIDS prevention campaign because the speed we were travelling at meant I could not read the text. When we stopped at a set of lights I asked my Vietnamese travelling companions about them. They did not know what I was talking because they could not locate which board I was referring to among all the other hoardings along the way. At another set of traffic lights there was another of these boards and we sat stationary at this intersection long enough for me read the text. As we drove back to HCMC I became impressed with the frequency in which I began to see these boards around Can Tho.

In Can Tho this style of board was distributed in many different places; one near a University gate, others on high traffic volume intersections and near factories. But in HCMC I only saw them in two places. In District Eleven they faced two major roads, but in District One it was in a quiet side street near a military hospital. As I have already mentioned earlier, the District One location is now a major construction site, and this makes me conclude they are not for local domestic consumption but are rather targeting itinerant labourers who work and live on these two sites. These men usually reside onsite without their spouses and I guess are assumed more likely purchase sex. There are some women who live and work on these sites too. If these boards are indeed intended for these building workers then once again there is a mismatch between the image in the message and that of the target audience. The men on these sites work long arduous hours and are exhausted at the end of their twelve hour day. Sometimes they will work until ten pm. They are weather beaten, skin brown from constant exposure to the sun, and no matter how much they try, their clothes which they wash in cold water and hang to dry onsite, betray all attempts these make at being fashionable.

Clearly men are the target of this campaign, and at the same time it stigmatises women, because the images say it is women who give men HIV. It is the man in the billboards who is in shock and not the woman. Is the image of the women that of a *bia om* or beer girl? No matter, she has left the scene. But why is she not at risk? The woman in this scenario is equally at risk for HIV infection as is the man if they have

collect his/her *tiền lì xì* or lucky money from the wealthy industrialist who lived there. I joined them in one of the industrialist's chauffeur driven limousines to the Mekong Delta.

sex without a condom. Furthermore, the image used here is that of a financially well off young man whom can purchase an expensive shirt, is well groomed and can pay for expensive cocktails. He even has enough money to pay for a taxi: with gel in his hair riding his motor bike to the venue his hair would flatten it out. Construction workers would not have gel in their hair and would not drink cocktails because they could not afford either, nor would they have an expensive shirt. Construction workers earn so little money, and what money they do earn is remitted back to wives or families in the provinces, and from my experience their preferred alcoholic drink is *bia tươi*, beer freshly brewed at the site where it is consumed and it is cheap.

Social Interaction

Nobody in HCMC can go anywhere in that city without seeing their streets, footpaths, buildings and fences festooned with images and messages of all kinds. These billboards and banners contain a whole range of messages which include mass education around family planning, diet (see Gammaltolft 1999), social evils, nationalism, history, Ho Chi Minh, and HIV/AIDS. In 2008, HIV/AIDS billboards were competing for wall space with a much better funded and more widely seen campaign promoting the wearing of motorcycle helmets, and increasingly there has been a proliferation of commercial advertising of consumer products on large illuminated billboards and huge neon signs. So how then do men, let alone gay men, make any sense of these HIV/AIDS billboards in isolation from all the other noise they compete with?

I would contend they cannot make any sense of the supposed messages for a number of reasons. First, as I have described, Plates 2-5 of the publically displayed billboards are poorly targeted, lack clear or meaningful information, there is nothing about sex, they rely on fear and next to abstinence there is no mention of condoms as being the single most effective way to reduce risk of HIV infection when having sex. While the first two boards described (Plates 1 & 2) have been framed by the fear appeal model, particularly with the graphic use of a hypodermic syringe injecting "Aids" into a skeletal form of a human and the second board contains the exploding virus, or is it a heart?, occupying the chest of a corpse. Again the meaning that is being

projected on to the community is that if you get HIV it is the end of love and that AIDS means death, but the entire world and the AIDS office will help with your death. The most obvious thing to note regarding these billboards, however, is the complete lack of representation of same sex attracted men. I concede the first board discussed is specifically designed to address injecting drug users and is not sex related, but it is a classic example using fear to frame its message.

In the second set of boards, plates 3, 4 & 5 on pages 205, 206 and 210 respectively, the target audience is heterosexual and they have been treated as homogenous, there are no heterogeneous features. No special cultural sensitivity has been applied in any attempt to address any other identity or at-risk group, other than heterosexuals. Whether it is the Sunrise Clinic billboards or the “boy in the bar” billboard the imagery has been designed clearly to interact at a basic surface level only (Resnicow, Dilorio and Davis 2008), engaging only with heterosexual men and women without challenging the state’s preferred image of its population. There is no message about condom use, no mention of unsafe sex, no mention of multiple partners... just emotive imagery and a few reassuring words.

The most effective of all these boards from community health point of view is the “injecting aids into your body” billboard in Plate 1 because it actually addresses a specific means of transmission, and is at least educative in that single sense. The message is simple, there is no ambiguity with this particular image and it does not shy away from the fact of injecting HIV infected blood when injecting illicit drugs guarantees infection. Yet none of the heterosexualised HIV/AIDS messages directly address the actual path of infection, that is, fucking without a condom. It is only suggestive, and illusion to alcohol, pretty girls, sex and worry. The Sunrise Medical Centre campaign just infers if you are worried about HIV/AIDS trust us, talk to us, and get tested... but it doesn’t appear to know who “you” might be. And I wonder as to the efficacy of this approach. I spoke to a doctor at his clinic about sex education and HIV information for his own children who were nine and thirteen years old. He said that he would not tell them anything thing. I asked him why and how will they find out? He said that as their parent this was not something he could talk about and he was happy

for them to get information from the friends or off the street. He did not seem to consider how effective or accurate that information was.

The history of HIV shows the virus remains ostensibly within the communities that the virus first appears in. Simplistically, in the West that is gay men and IDU; on the African continent that is heterosexual men and women; in Asia it is a combination heterosexuals, IDUs and gay men. However, the HIV profile varies from country to country and can vary within a country, thus making the epidemic more regionalised and profile specific. In Vietnam the epidemic appeared in the injecting drug user community and later in female commercial sex workers and their clients, but gay men have not been included in any national testing and we just don't know what the rates of infection are. Yet we know that in Thailand HIV infections in gay men peaked at 30% in 2007 (Peabody 2010). Despite the above it is only injecting drug users who have received any direct and unambiguous information on the risks of HIV infection and its sources.

Conclusion

So where are same-sex attracted men in these billboards? Simply, they don't exist. In this chapter I have discussed how most HIV/AIDS prevention and education strategies are generally based on Western models of health promotion that uses a psychological framework that also operates by framing sex and sexuality within Western epistemology, with little account for how sexuality and identity takes shape in non-Western settings. In Vietnam publically displayed HIV/AIDS billboards fall within health models that perpetuate Western assumptions around HIV/AIDS that relegates Vietnamese ideas of sex and sexuality as being not important. But more importantly these billboards have failed to communicate effective and worthwhile information to their heterosexual audience.

We can also read other negotiations taking place in the evolution of the boards. They seem to tell a story of cheap and simple attempts at public communication, and there is a good chance that the designs of the early images were selected from design or art school student work, or at least graduates of such schools, state artists working

within the propaganda offices of government agencies. In the later boards we see the influence and indeed acknowledged role of external aid and community development agencies. The effect of their funding is obvious in the upgrading of billboard materials and printing techniques. But it is also clear that, while they have been able to persuade the government to make AIDS more visible among all the other things capturing the attention of urban populations, they have not been able to shift campaigns in any direction that would communicate with MSM, that unrecorded risk group in Vietnam. Equally they have failed in raising community awareness of the dangers of unprotected fucking, or, and this may be the rub, the safety of protected fucking.

Because MSM are such a fluid and porous population in Vietnam their health is very much bound up with the health of the community as a whole. Yet the current discourse of transvestism and/or foreign spiritual pollution renders them invisible. In a way they are invisible, given that they don't form a coherent population or groups of populations, but it would not be impossible to convey, politely, signs of male same sex attraction and protected sex in terms that men who have sex with men might relate to themselves. In the next chapter I look at how the continued use by health and development workers of Western discourse around sex and sexuality and HIV/AIDS conspires with the Vietnamese State linking research on MSM and rates of HIV infection to the construction of homosexuality as transvestism. This in turn marginalises a large group of men who have sex with other men because they fail to identify with such categorical labelling.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: A Different Reality

Fuck the Categories

Quentin Lee 18 June 2001,

cited in

Helen Hok-Sze Leung 2008, p.117

This thesis explores what it is to be gay, a homosexual, or a same-sex attracted man in the Vietnamese context. While for me this story incorporated my experience of becoming a sexual being, it was through an experience of geographic and sexual disorientation which led me to questions of sexual orientation and understanding of self and sex/uality for my new found friends. *Approaching the Orient*, in recounting patterns of socialisation and seduction, alerts us to layers of misunderstanding and unearths a community acceptance of gay sex in Vietnam. This acceptance is possible because of a different relationship Vietnamese have to sexual labels. Western discursive practice simply cannot accommodate anything outside of the homo/heterosexuality dichotomy, yet it is bound to confront these differences when operating in non-Western contexts. But also, *Approaching the Orient* is also an exercise in risk taking.

This project was/is not without risks. Writing about sex is a sensitive matter in any genre but writing in the first person about experiences of sex provides people with the opportunity to call this endeavour self indulgent, navel gazing, gratuitous or confessional. This thesis does display a level of *self disclosure* that exceeds what normally might be found in an academic endeavour. By choosing this approach I expose myself and what I write about to a level of criticism that could be deeply damaging to me, both personally and professionally. Being aware of this possibility

makes writing about sex and sexuality in the academic arena a fraught endeavour but I believe the benefits to be derived from breaking through some of these barriers could have important outcomes for the men I am so attached to. What I lived and what I was part of in Vietnam is very different from what health and development workers and, other academics have experienced in relation to homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in Vietnam, or even care to acknowledge. This has important implications for how future HIV/AIDS health prevention and health promotion can address Vietnamese same-sex attracted men, but as I note shortly, it will require careful negotiation (or even skilful subterfuge) in relations to the organs of the Vietnamese state.

Initially I found myself drawn back to Vietnam because the allure for sex with men was not only possible, it was permissible. Men I desired, who in-turn pursued me for their erotic satisfaction, and it thrilled me. The Vietnamese community appeared to me to have made an accommodation for male same-sex behaviour, while at the same time providing no distinct 'gay community' or 'gay culture' that revolved around homosexuality as an identity. Nor did one need to be 'out and proud' to be able to claim rights to another man's body. This provided men with opportunities for sexual encounters without enduring ridicule or punishment. As an identity homosexuality is invisible, but as a practice it is happening in public and in private, while all the time being under the gaze of the broader community. Vietnam had created a homosocial space (Carrier et al 1997, Asthana & Oostvogels 2001) where men held hands, slept or showered together, where they can be intimate with each other in ways that I had not seen before. This confused my understanding of what it was to be homosexual. As time goes by, too, a gay culture, fragmented and disparate, appears to not only be emergent but confident.

Approaching the Orient constructs a reflexive ethnography where my own standpoint and internalisations of sex/uality are contrasted with those of people from a different culture, a context different to that of my life and my understanding of sex and sexuality. This also has implications for identity formation. I have articulated my own displeasure of having essentialising identity labels ascribed to me by others simply on the basis of the genitalia of the person I share my body with. But I notice that much the same thing is happening in Vietnam to Vietnamese same-sex attracted men at the

mercy of Western researchers and HIV/AIDS health and development workers. Current research on HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in Vietnam succumbs to the same processes of identity ascription without appreciating that the men who live it may think differently about it, and more importantly find it irrelevant.

Without negating Western formulations of homo/hetero/sex/uality or the existence of gay politics and its importance for claiming equal rights I heed the advice of Wu, Masten, Halperin and others and suspend contemporary homosexual discourse to describe same-sex attracted men through their diverse sexual behaviours and, because of this it makes it difficult to define homosexuality in the Vietnamese context. However, other researchers and academics have been less hesitant in using sexual behaviour as the only ascribable feature of sexual identity making, this misreads local context and in turn perpetuates a number of fallacies.

Context is everything!

The problem is not limited to Vietnam, but derives from the power assumed by external aid agencies in cooperation with the state. Ho (2007) states that in China research undertaken in this same area is " ... basically informed by the assumptions of Western ideologies which seek to extend their domain" (p199). In Vietnam most contemporary research is concerned with how Vietnamese same-sex attracted male identity and behaviour is framed in terms of hegemonic Western categories, discourses and practices while attempting to engage a local articulation of homosexuality that is entirely out of line with it. Western paradigms in the Vietnamese context fail to acknowledge the different epistemological points assumed by the researcher and their research participants.

Approaching the Orient documents my lived experience of gay sex in Vietnam and offers an alternative to Western bio-medical understandings and discourses where sexual behaviour is not axiomatically linked to sexual identity, and where understanding sexual behaviour is at variance with how the Vietnamese state constructs homosexuality and gay identity. It shows how the post-colonial, post-socialist state, imagining itself as modern is quick to adopt modern Western terms such as 'MSM' and 'gay' to construct and manage a homosexual identity that has little to do

with how most same-sex attracted men live or experience sex with men. Most Vietnamese same-sex attracted men have a very different personal understanding of what it is to be gay, one that is completely divergent from what they see in newspapers. This mix of confusion, invisibility and blindness feeds into what research has been undertaken on HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in Vietnam, and it is clear that none of it manages to accommodate local lived constructions of sexuality but perpetuates Western models while trying to develop a Vietnamese sexual taxonomy. Given how fraught public discourse can be around issues of sexuality - anywhere around the world - the difference between lived experiences and public ideology and discourse can be immense.

Making use of a personal history of sex with men in Vietnam this thesis has drawn attention to the gap existing between current academic understandings of Vietnamese men's sexuality as well as the subsequent inability of sexual health and community workers to offer appropriate leadership in addressing the needs of a significant at risk sector of the community. Many methodological innovations are needed before we can begin to address those men's health needs, and most derive from their status as an invisible population. Their invisibility is constructed via three different but interlocking discourses. First, the men I have been meeting do not perceive themselves as being radically different from other men, and they do not seek to differentiate themselves. They are men who see themselves as being like other men, and they are invisible because they are simply part of the blend that makes up Vietnamese male sexual expression. This is not the whole story, but it is a big part of it. Secondly, the post-colonial, post-socialist state has its own hang-ups surrounding its modernity and international standing, as well as its claims to uphold a straight laced (and actually modern) interpretation of Confucian morality and social order. Still advocating scientific socialism it is easily attracted to neat typologies and bio-medical models that give the illusion of control. Paradoxically, these techniques of knowledge/power allow the state to ignore or even deny what large numbers of Vietnamese are doing simply because it has its eye out for labels and not for people, practices or behaviours.

Thirdly, the international community development sector and health agencies in Vietnam are little better in terms of their focus on labels, and they can certainly be

accused of being unwilling or unable to discourage the Vietnamese government in this respect. Redeeming them for a moment, they are doing research and they are reaching out. But as I have been arguing, that research and reaching out will not lead anywhere much until they first reflect back on their own methodological blind-spots. I am not claiming, in saying this, that I have discovered a/the “truth” that is “the” answer to their “error”, but what I hope I have been able to show is how much more can be known by reflexively adjusting our research methods and agendas (the two are linked). This thesis adds to a growing literature of HIV/AIDS, gay and homosexuality in the Asian region and it also calls for methodological innovation. By seeking a path from life to research via memoir and online technologies it adds significantly to the existing, but very limited, academic writing on HIV/AIDS and gay/homosexual behaviour and identity in the Vietnamese context. In pursuing this study, other research needs have become apparent that would contribute to the body of knowledge around the articulation of male same-sex identity in contemporary Vietnam. Future research needs further innovation include:

- understanding the emerging diverse expression of Vietnamese gay or homosexual identity as local categories that ‘cannot be simply the result of being informed by Western theoretical paradigms’ (Ho 2007 p. 199)
- use of the internet as a ‘gay social space’ to recruit a broader and more representative cross section of same-sex attracted men
- questions of HIV/AIDS awareness and safe sex practices for *callboys* advertising on web-based advertising spaces, including chat rooms
- developing a culturally appropriate vocabulary for promoting HIV/AIDS health prevention and communication based on and informed by sexual behaviour and not sexual identity

HIV/AIDS is a disease and set of illnesses that do not discriminate. Sexuality or identity labels make little difference to who is infected. It is people who are infected and families and communities that are affected, but it is what people do that puts them at risk. It is time for researchers, health and development works to uncover new and meaningful ways to communicate with people; not with prescribed identities. As

Dennis Altman (2006) stated "Stopping the spread of HIV should be easy," but it has proved anything but.

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Appendix 1

Qua vụ "thác loạn tại Trung tâm Chăm sóc thể hình ở TP Hồ Chí Minh":

Báo hiệu những nguy cơ trong một bộ phận giới trẻ

Tổ chức Sức khỏe thế giới không coi ĐTA (thất) là một bệnh mà chỉ là một tình trạng của cơ thể giống như người thuận tay trái so với người thuận tay phải. Khi đang những bài viết dưới đây, chúng tôi không

khuyến khích các trường hợp quan hệ đồng tính theo "mode" (ĐTA giả) và thiết nghĩ cũng cần có cái nhìn thông cảm với những người ĐTA thật mà bản thân họ cũng không muốn mình là người ĐTA.



Biểu diễn thời trang của các "nàng" tại dạ hội

MSM và nguy cơ nhiễm HIV

Hiện tượng đồng tính ái nam - MSM (Men Sex with Men) ở Việt Nam trong những năm gần đây cũng đã được xã hội quan tâm. Bà cuộc điều tra, nghiên cứu về MSM ở Việt Nam (Nghiên cứu hiện tượng MSM tại TP Hồ Chí Minh do tổ chức SCF-UK - Quỹ Bảo trợ trẻ em Anh Quốc thực hiện năm 1997; luận văn tốt nghiệp thạc sĩ ngành Y tế công cộng Mỹ của Donn Colby, nghiên cứu về MSM tại TP Hồ Chí Minh năm 2001; điều tra xã hội học về nhóm mại dâm nam ở Hà Nội năm 2002) đã phần nào phần ánh thực trạng và những mối nguy hại mà lây nhiễm HIV đối với đối tượng MSM từ việc có nhiều bạn tình và không sử dụng bao cao su thường xuyên.

Nếu HIV xuất hiện trong cộng đồng này thì sẽ lây lan rất nhanh chóng. Qua điều tra cho thấy có 44% người đồng tính ái không được tuyên truyền giáo dục về khả năng lây nhiễm HIV qua đường quan hệ tình dục. Thông tin từ các phương tiện truyền thông đại chúng thường không xem MSM như là một đối tượng nguy cơ và thiếu chương trình giáo dục phòng chống HIV dành cho họ. Điều này dẫn đến nhận thức sai lầm rằng MSM không có nguy cơ nhiễm HIV và việc thay đổi hành vi quan hệ đồng tính là không cần thiết. Công theo kết quả điều tra, thành phố Hồ Chí Minh có một lượng lớn MSM có thể dễ dàng tiếp cận qua giao dục đồng đẳng của các giáo dục viên đường phố (các chuyên viên thiện nguyện của người đồng tính luyến ái). Phòng chống HIV nhằm vào MSM thông qua các giáo dục viên đồng đẳng sẽ góp phần tăng cường khả năng ngăn chặn việc lây nhiễm HIV trong cộng đồng xã hội.

TÓT TÂM



Các giáo dục viên đường phố TP Hồ Chí Minh đang tuyên truyền phòng chống HIV/AIDS

ANH: C.T.V

Thế giới của "phân nửa đàn ông"...

• ĐOÀN NGỌC PHỤNG

Trong ánh đèn mờ ảo của vũ trường, nhạc chuyển qua sôi nổi, các bạn trẻ nhún nhảy theo điệu nhạc một cách hào hứng. Rời khỏi đám đông, Benny - một gay con rất trẻ ở Q.Phú Nhuận (TP Hồ Chí Minh) "hấp dẫn" trong bộ váy bó sát lộ ra nguyên phần lưng từ tới nơi cưỡi trong vòng tay của một "nam nhân" thứ thiệt. Cả hai tiến đến quầy bar, Benny cất giọng: "Cho em với "anh" hai chai bia đi anh trai!..."

Cái tên Benny được "khai sinh" trong một ngày Đông nhận ra cái tên của mình "quá u nam tính" và biết rằng mình thích son phấn hơn mại cạo râu. Thế là Benny trở thành (phần nửa) con gái và tìm cách cặp với những chàng to con, đẹp trai. Đôi lúc, nét nữ tính bị hao tổn ít nhiều khi Benny nói đùa khi phải nghe những câu nhận xét như "đó xàng pha nhời", "bóng", "bê", "mên" của "mấy người kỳ cục muốn chết. Không biết "thương hoa tiếc ngọc" hay sao ấy".

Benny tâm sự với tôi bằng giọng buồn buồn: "Chỉ em gái với anh (!) Benny mới nói như. Không hiểu sao Benny luôn thật lòng tìm một người yêu thương mình thực sự mà vẫn cứ bị "kép" phụ tình hoài. Chắc ! Mình "chiều chuộng" mấy anh lắm mà. Đúng là "hồng nhan bạc phận" thiệt!".

Còn Lâm (Xô Viết Nghệ Tĩnh, P.17, Q.Bình Thạnh, TP Hồ Chí Minh) là một chàng trai có những thói quen "khá nữ tính". Đi chơi chung nhóm, chẳng bao giờ Lâm mang váy hay xách ngang vớ ! Sự tinh minh chai hết, thông cảm nha" ... Khi cười thì e lấy tay che miệng, ngồi khép nép, ăn uống nhỏ nhẹ, thích được những thanh niên trong nhóm đối xử dịu dàng... Có một lần đi picnic chung, Lâm thổ lộ tâm sự khi các bạn trai đang phân công để chở bạn gái: "Lâm không thích đạp xe đâu, Lâm chỉ thích được người khác chở thôi hà...". Còn Luynh, chủ một của hiệu cắt tóc nổi tiếng ở Q.Tân Bình đã chăm sóc bạn trai mình rất chu đáo để "chàng" luôn cảm thấy hạnh phúc khi ở bên mình. Luynh mua

xe gắn máy, sắm những bộ đồ đất tiền, điện thoại di động đời mới... cho người mình yêu "bằng với người ta". Và khi T., người tình của Luynh khi mới "manh nha" có ý định với một nữ sinh đã bị Luynh cho người "dần mặt" ngay đối với người tình không chung thủy. Không biết là do quen thói tiêu xài hay là xúc động trước "mảnh lụa tình yêu" của "người tình đặc biệt" của mình hay sao mà sau những "sống giở" như vậy, Luynh và chàng ta vẫn cặp kè bên nhau.

Dù sao thì Luynh vẫn "may mắn" vì có đủ điều kiện vật chất để "chàng yêu chàng quý". Còn Chung, hành nghề... bán rau muống ở chợ, thì tình hình quả là bi đát khi hết bị chàng này "phụ" đến chàng kia "chối" khi "tiền đã với thì tình cũng cạn". Nhìn Chung ngồi lì mãi bộ từng bộ rau muống một thì mới thấy những lần vung tiền cho người tình của "anh" quả là phí lý. Chung cười cười: "Tình yêu mà, sao tính toán bằng tiền bạc được. Chẳng tại mình "không có duyên" với mấy anh (!)...".

D.N.P

Đồng tính ái là gì ?

Để hiểu cần k hơn về ĐTA, Bác sĩ - thạc sĩ Trương Trọng Hoàng, Trưởng phòng Giáo dục sức khỏe Trung tâm Truyền thông, giáo dục sức khỏe TP Hồ Chí Minh đã trả lời phỏng vấn của PV Báo Thanh Niên:

* PV: Thế nào là ĐTA, thưa bác sĩ?

- Bác sĩ Trương Trọng Hoàng: Nói một cách đơn giản thì ĐTA thật (homosexuality) hay chính xác hơn là bản thể ĐTA (homosexual identity) là tình trạng một người có ham muốn gần gũi và quan hệ tình dục (QHTD) với người cùng giới tính (đồng, cùng, tính: giới tính, ái: thương). Có ĐTA nam và ĐTA nữ. ĐTA nam tiếng Anh gọi là "gay"; ĐTA nữ gọi

là "lesbian" hay là "ô mồi" do xuất phát từ chữ homo-sexual. Từ pe-dê có xuất xứ từ chữ pédéraste tiếng Pháp, nghĩa nguyên gốc của nó chỉ những người đàn ông nam muốn và có quan hệ tình dục với trẻ em trai, sau phổ biến dần thành từ chỉ chung người ĐTA nam.

ĐTA có thể chia thành hai dạng: ĐTA dạng mở (overt hay out-to-out) là những người không che giấu tình trạng ĐTA của mình, thường ít gặp trong phạm vi của người khác phái. Dạng thứ hai



Bác sĩ Trương Trọng Hoàng

là ĐTA kín (covert hoặc homosexual) là những người không dám công khai tình trạng ĐTA của mình. Những người này bị ngoại không khác gì người đàn ông hay phụ nữ bình thường nhưng trong thâm tâm họ chỉ ham muốn QHTD với người cùng phái.

Những người ĐTA hoàn toàn có thể QHTD với người khác phái sinh con đẻ cháu, chỉ có điều họ không thích thôi. Cần phân biệt ĐTA với người lưỡng tính tức là những người cùng lúc có cả bộ phận sinh dục nam và nữ, thường là không hoàn chỉnh.

* PV: Như thế nào là ĐTA giả?

- Bác sĩ Trương Trọng Hoàng: Người ĐTA giả là những người không thực sự có bản thể ĐTA nhưng vì một hoàn cảnh xã hội nào đó mà muốn và có

QHTD với người cùng phái. Có thể kể ra các dạng: ĐTA thay thế (là những người quan hệ tình dục cùng giới vì tò mò trong một môi trường sống lâu ngày chỉ toàn là người cùng phái như trường nam, trường nữ...); ĐTA tò mò (là những người quan hệ tình dục cùng giới vì tò mò, muốn thử, chạy theo "mode"). Tuy chưa có số liệu cụ thể nhưng qua các cuộc khảo sát điều tra, có thể khẳng định phần lớn các bạn trẻ thanh niên ĐTA hiện nay đều là... giả. Điều này hoàn toàn không nên vì khi đã trở lại là "mình" thì thời gian họ tiếp xúc xã hội sẽ dễ bị an tượng tâm lý không tốt, ảnh hưởng đến đời sống hôn nhân gia đình sau này.

TIẾN GIANG
(thực hiện)

Appendix 2

A scandal at a gymnasium: A warning about risks of sexual abuse and HIV infection

According to WHO (World Health Organization), homosexuality is not a 'disease', but a sexual behaviour or attraction between people of the same sex. The following articles are published not to encourage 'fake' homosexuals, who have been lured by fashion or

experimentation into trying homosexuality, but to sympathize with 'true' homosexuals, who are inherently homosexuals, and who themselves 'don't want to be homosexuals'.



(Note: A fashion show of gays)

A world of gays

In the flashing and flickering lights of a bustling discotheque, a group of young people are excitedly dancing to the disco music. Benny, a very young gay 'sexy' in a tight dress exposing 'her' smooth back, is chattering in the cuddle of a 'handsome' gay. Both of them are approaching the bar. "Could you please give me and my sweetheart two bottles of beer please?" Benny said to the waiter...

One day, Dũng - a Vietnamese boy, realized how 'masculine' his name is! and knew that he prefers wearing make up to shaving. Dũng decided to change his name to 'Benny'. Then, Benny has become 'half man, half woman' and tried to date 'fit and handsome' men. Sometimes, Benny was angry because he was discriminated against and verbally abused for being a gay. Some people, whom Benny considers as 'shameful' and 'rude' towards women called him 'bông' (half man, half woman), 'bê' (faggot), 'mên' (feminine man), or 'dò xăng pha nhớt' (Mix of petrol and diesel)... Benny confided to me in a voice filled with emotion:

"I tell you the truth because we are both 'women', I don't know how many more heartbreaks I would have to go through before I can find the right man. Men are not faithful to me!" and added that "That's the life! Pretty women are often unlucky in love".

Lâm, (from Xô Viết Nghệ Tĩnh street, ward 17, Phú Nhuận district, Hồ Chí Minh city), is also a 'feminised' boy. Fearing that his soft hands become callous, Lâm has never carried heavy things. When he smiles, he covers his mouth with his hands. Lâm sits, stands, eats or drinks in a shy way and speaks in a soft voice. Lâm likes being treated gently and kindly by other men. Once, Lâm and his friends went for a picnic, Lâm whispered to the boys "I don't like riding a bicycle, I prefer you giving me a lift on your bicycle please!".

Luỳnh, who owns a famous hairdressing saloon in Tân Bình district, looks after his boyfriend carefully so his boyfriend is always happy with him. Huỳnh bought his lover motorbikes, expensive clothes, modern mobile phones... to guarantee their love and relationship. When his

boyfriend intended to leave him for a young female student, Huỳnh hired a private investigator to forewarn his boyfriend of his unfaithfulness. I don't know whether or not interest in gay sex, romantic love or money, which has brought them together through all life's ups and downs.

No matter what happened, Huỳnh has still been 'lucky' due to his financial security, which can attract young boys, unlike Huỳnh, Chung, who sells vegetables at market, is a poor gay. His love story was a tragedy since his boyfriends always betrayed him. "When money has gone, love falls apart". Seeing Chung working very hard in the market, I wonder whether money can buy him gay-love and why he has to exchange his 'hard-work' money for gay-love and relationship. Chung smiled and said "We cannot put a price on love because it is not for sale. Love comes, then love goes because love is truly a destiny!"

Reported by Đoàn Ngọc Phụng

Men who have sex with men (MSM) and a high risk for HIV infection

Men who have sex with men (MSM) in Vietnam have gained social interest for recent years. Three investigations into MSM in Vietnam including (1) a survey of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Ho Chi Minh city conducted by SCF-UK, 'Save the Children Fund (UK) in 1997; (2) a Master thesis entitled "Men Who Have Sex With Men" (MSM) in Ho Chi Minh city in 2001 undertaken by Donn Colby, an American Fulbright Research Scholar; (3) a sociological investigation into male sex workers in Ha Noi in 2002, have showed significant numbers of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Vietnam and increased risks for HIV infection due to high numbers of sexual partners, high rate of unsafe sex, and inconsistent condom use.

If HIV exists in MSM community, there will be a very high risk for HIV prevalence. According to investigations, there is about 44% of MSM who didn't get any HIV infection information through sexual behaviours. The lack of information about HIV prevalence among MSM and the fact that the media and public health prevention programs ignore MSM as a population at risk leads many MSM to mistakenly believe that their risk for HIV is low. The low perception of risk, combined with inadequate knowledge, may cause MSM less likely to change their behaviours and to actively protect themselves from HIV infection. The investigations also showed that MSM peer educators and consultants (educators and consultants are also MSM) can effectively contact and provide HIV prevention information and materials to large groups of MSM in Ho Chi Minh city. The fact that MSM peer educators are trained to provide outreach services to MSM community have contributed to the decrease of the risk for HIV infection in Vietnam.

(Reported by To Tam)



(Note: MSM peer educators are discussing HIV prevention with MSM, distributing brochures, condoms...)

What is homosexuality?"

In order to get a better understanding of homosexuality, Thanh Nien's journalist asked for an exclusive interview with Dr Trương Trọng Hoàng, Head of Education & Health Department, Hồ Chí Minh city.

Journalist: Could you please tell me what "đồng tính ái" (homosexuality) is?

Dr Hoàng: Basically "đồng tính ái" ("true homosexuality"), or more exactly "bản thể DTA" (homosexuality identity) refers to a person who has romantic desire for, erotic attraction to, sexual behaviour and sexual involvement with members of the same sex. (đồng: same; tính: gender; ái: love). There are male homosexuals and female homosexuals. Male homosexuals are defined as "gays" in English. Female homosexuals are named as "lesbians" or "ô môi", which originally comes from 'homosexuals' 'pá-pá' comes

from 'pédéraste' in French, which originally refers to a man who has sexual desire for young teenagers, then becomes a general word for a male homosexual. Homosexuals fall into two general types: 'DTA dạng mở' (overt or out-to-out)



Bác sĩ Trương Trọng Hoàng

homosexuals have no hesitation in admitting their homosexuality and in practicing it openly. They prefer wearing women's clothes;

'DTA kín' (covert, closet) homosexuals keep their activities hidden from public, family, friends. They avoid associating publicly with known homosexuals and, in general, lead the life of a typical heterosexual. They are not different from 'normal' men or women in appearance, but they only find their true inner sexual desire for same-sex partners. In general, homosexuals are able to have sex, get married and have children with the people of opposite sex. The problem is that they don't like leading the life of a typical heterosexual. Most of them ended up married and having kids as their obligation and responsibility toward family and society. It is also important to distinguish a homosexual from an 'intersexual individual', who is born between (inter) sexes, usually having partially developed pairs of female and male sex organs.

Journalist: What is a 'fake' homosexual?

Dr Hoàng: A fake homosexual does not have a homosexual self-image. He/she is involved in homosexual sex due to some special circumstances. For instance, 'DTA

opportunistic, incidental, or institutional) homosexuality is commonly defined as sexual activity of partners of the same sex because participants happen to find themselves in a single-sex environment for a prolonged period. Boarding schools or colleges are examples, where boys or girls are forcibly separated from their opposite-sex partners for a long time. 'DTA tò mò' (homocurious) refers to a person who has been lured by fashion, mode or experimentation into trying homosexuality and who will eventually return to a heterosexual lifestyle. Although there has been no statistical evidence, some recent survey and investigations have revealed that the majority of young homosexuals in Vietnam are 'giả' (fake). I also warn young teenagers who see homosexuality as a fashion or mode that their curiosity to experiment with the opposite sex is dangerous, since it may cause serious psychological consequences for their future heterosexual marriage.

Reported by Tiên Giang