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**The Irony of Agency in Space: Displacement and Vulnerability
In Two Highways in Vietnam**

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“(Social) space is a (social) product”

(Lefebvre, 1991: 26)

“The subject’s relation to space and time is not passive; space is not simply an empty receptacle, independent of its content; rather, the ways in which space is perceived and represented depend on the kind of objects position “within” it, and more particularly, the kind of relation the subject has to those objects. Space makes possible different kinds of relations but in turn is transformed according to the subject’s affective and instrumental relations with it...Space does not become comprehensible to the subject by its being the space of movement; rather, it becomes space through movement, and as such, it acquires specific properties from the subject’s constitutive functioning in it.”

(Grosz, 1995: 92)

It was a rare sunny day on the Ho Chi Minh highway when I returned to the construction site after a short trip home. Everything appeared to come alive again on such a day, especially amidst a monsoon that usually lasts for several months. Hoan, informal head of the group of migrant labors that I worked with, greeted me with a big smile and informed me that his group was able to complete more work during the past couple of days when the sun shined up. This is important for him and his fellow workers since their work was far behind the schedule. Hoan then told me that he had something he wanted my advice on. Later at lunch time, some young men joked that I came back on time since Quang, one member of the group, had ‘love illness’ (bệnh tình yêu) that needed immediate medical attention. Quang reacted weakly to the joke and tried to dissuade his friends from going further. After lunch, when I reminded Hoan of our earlier conversation, he told me that Quang had had severe pain and yellowish discharge while urinating for about a week. On further inquiry, Quang admitted that he had sex with Hong, a young woman from an ethnic minority village near their camp.

I knew that Quang, as well as some others in the group, were having relationship with young ethnic minority women in the nearby village. On many occasions, I heard the young men talking about how easy it was for them to ask young local women for a night out, and to go further into sexual intimacy. The group that I worked with had just moved to this site a couple of weeks ago (from another site on the highway), and young men in the group were very quick in establishing relationships with young ethnic minority women. Every night, young migrant labors donned on their best clothes and walked out under the rain for their dates.

When I asked what they had done for Quang, Hoan said that they were waiting to see if the symptoms would die down. They knew that Quang might suffer from a serious STI¹, as they had learned from their experiences that several men in their home village who had ‘promiscuous sex’ also suffered from similar kind of problems. They, however, never thought that the kind of relationship between Quang and Hong, whom they also knew, was ‘promiscuous’. Nor thought they that the relationship was serious in the sense that Quang would ended up marrying the girl. This young ethnic minority woman was not the only one that Quang had sex with while working on the highway. He had visited sex workers in Khe Sanh, a township that was located on Road 9 and known for having

establishments with ‘hospitality’ women. He also had sexual relationships with several ethnic minority women at other sites along the Ho Chi Minh highway that the group had worked in. But this is the first time that he suffered from such a problem. So Quang and his fellow workers still hoped that what they had thought of was not the case.

The vignette that I just offered happened to one of two dozens migrant labors with whom I conducted my dissertation research over the past 18 months. Two questions that arise are: Why did it happen to Quang, a migrant laborer? And why did he get the disease from his relationship with young ethnic minority women in the Ho Chi Minh highway, rather than from his visits to sex workers in urban townships along the Road 9? A week later, I asked Quang what he thought as the reasons for his problem². He said he “got it” from Hong, the young ethnic minority woman that he had relationship with. He didn’t use condoms when he had sex with her, nor did he in his sexual encounters with other ethnic minority young women that he had met while working and moving along the highway. He never thought that STIs, let alone HIV/AIDS, could ever exist in places as remote as ethnic minority villages along the Ho Chi Minh highway. After all, condoms were not readily available at highway constructions sites or at local health stations. This is different from what often happened when he visited sex workers in Khe Sanh, who usually offered condoms to clients and would not engage in sex had clients refused.

Currently, most literature on the link between migration, and mobility for that matter, and the spread of HIV/AIDS resort to two main theoretical perspectives to explain why migrant labors like Quang are at risk of getting infected with STIs and HIV/AIDS. One perspective would immediately point out that Quang did not have ‘deep’ understanding about STIs and HIV, so he had the illusion that young ethnic minority women living in remote villages along the Ho Chi Minh highway were generally free from STIs. This perspective emphasizes characteristics and attributes of individual migrant labors like Quang, especially their lack of appropriate knowledge and attitudes. From another perspective that has received increasing attention (Parker, 2001; Parker et al, 2000; Singer, 1998; UNAIDS, 2001), it could be argued that unavailability of condoms and the lack of HIV education program at workplace for migrant labors are those institutional problems that need redressed. Those in favor of this perspective would further point to contextual factors that shape vulnerability of migrant labors in the first place: nationalistic desires for large scale development projects without which individuals like Quang and Hong would probably never have met; various disparities in terms of ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status that define unequal power relationship between migrant labors and young ethnic minority women; and lack of alternative cash-paid jobs in rural areas as a ‘push’ factor that motivate individual migrant labors to leave their home villages. Both perspectives, one focusing on individual and the other on context, play important roles in explaining HIV vulnerability and designing prevention strategies for migrants and other mobile populations (Guest, 2001; Guest et al., 2003). Although “a holistic approach to HIV vulnerability” views these two perspectives as complementary (Guest, 2001), research and intervention often emphasize one at the expense of the other.

In this paper, I want to discuss a provisional framework in which both perspectives have important roles to play. However, rather than simply combining individual knowledge-deficiency and contextual explanations, this framework suggests that studies on the link between migration and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS need to pay greater attention to understanding the ways migrants imagine and live in space and how this process and its outcome, in turn, shape vulnerability of migrants. My attempt to articulate this argument is particularly influenced by the work of the French Marxist thinker Henry Lefebvre. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre examines how real,

lived social space (as opposed to empty ‘physical space’ and abstract ‘mental space’) is produced by concrete human practices and serves as a powerful tool in shaping people’s thoughts and actions. Lefebvre further suggests that if we agree that space is socially produced, our primary task is to examine the production of space rather than simply observing things in space. (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Certeau, 1984; Harvey, 2001; Massey, 1994 for similar theoretical approaches; or Zhang, 2001a, 2001b for examples of a study that benefits from Lefebvre’s insights)

But first, in the section that follows this introduction, I will describe my dissertation research conducted in one section of the Ho Chi Minh highway, which produced most materials for this paper. I will also describe briefly the study that I am conducting on several sites along Road 9, currently being upgraded as part of the East West Economic Corridor (EWEC), which provides a comparative perspective for my dissertation research. More detailed description of the Ho Chi Minh highway section and the EWEC will then follow in order to compare and contrast the spaces that shaped vulnerability of Quang and his fellow migrant labors. This comparison shows that epidemiologically speaking the EWEC seems to be the more ‘dangerous’ one of the two spaces. This then leads to the question of why Quang didn’t get infected with STIs from his visits to sex workers in the EWEC but from his relationship with a young ethnic minority woman living in the Ho Chi Minh highway. This question will be addressed in the final section with a framework that incorporates considerations of displacement, psychology of being in place and power differentials that shape imagination of and living in space.

Two interconnected studies: methodology and challenges

Most materials presented in this paper come from my dissertation research which focuses on the question: what does it mean to be a man in contemporary Vietnam? The study seeks to explore the diverse and mutable meanings of masculinity in fast changing contemporary Vietnam and the implications of changing meanings of masculinity on men’s sexual health, especially vulnerability to STIs and HIV/AIDS. To this end, I had planned to conduct my study in one section of then still-under-construction Ho Chi Minh highway. This 60-kilometer section is located in the western hilly part of Quang Tri province, near the border between Vietnam and Lao PDR. In that setting, different groups of men – Cuban supervisors, Vietnamese managers and engineers, soldiers, migrant labors, and local ethnic minority male residents – were working together to construct the symbol of a unified nation and, at the same time, construct their ways of ‘being a man’ that were often in competition and contradiction with each other. Having in mind Connell’s discussion of multiple masculinities competing for hegemonic position in any social and cultural setting (Connell, 1995, 2000), I thought that the highway would offer a unique space for learning about masculinities in contemporary Vietnam, a subject that is ubiquitous and yet fleeting. I also had planned to focus on one group of young male migrant labors, and study them in their interactions with other groups on the highway space as well as follow them to their new worksites after they completed work on the highway.

My original plan had to change its course as soon as I returned to the highway construction site at the end of the 2002 summer³. The construction project was at a phase when the demand for manual labors declined substantially. By the time I found the group that accepted my presence and follow-up plan they were almost at the end of their 8-month laboring on the highway. This group had twenty five men; most of them were single and under 25 years of age; a couple of men, including Hoan who were introduced in the vignette as the informal leader of the group, were married and had children. Most members of the group were from one village in the northern central

part of Vietnam – few hundred kilometers north of the highway section. Others were from villages and communes adjacent to the home village of the core group. The group worked under the management of a foreman whose wife was originally from the same village of most members. Some members of the group, such as Hoan and his brother, had worked for the foreman for more than five years. This element of stability in the group structure, though quite rare among many groups of migrant labors that I met on the highway (for more discussion on high turnout of migrant labors in the highway space, see below), really attracted me since it would allow me to realize the plan of following them to their new worksites. When they left the highway I decided to follow them rather than sticking around with managers of construction companies, who were generally unfriendly to curious outsiders⁴.

But it was the highly mobile nature of migration for labor that made it difficult for me to follow the whole group as had been planned⁵. Thus, while maintaining the original plan of following several core members to their new worksites, I also spent ample time in the home village of the group, studying those who stayed behind and what motivated the group to move out in the first place. This multi-sited ethnography yielded ample amount of data and information, including: hundreds of hours of participant observation at several work sites and at the home village of the migrant labors that were recorded in the form of field notes and photos; about 100 interviews with 15 migrant labors, 20 family members and 20 village fellows who were from different age and gender groups (often a couple of interviews per informant); life history interviews with 7 migrant labors, and with 15 men and women from the home village; and writing essays composed by 30 high school students at the home village who wrote about what ‘being a man or woman’ meant to them.

Even though my original plan to study the Ho Chi Minh highway as a microcosm of contemporary Vietnam was not materialized⁶, my interests on the highway remain. I was especially interested in the impacts of social change introduced by the highway, both during the construction phase and once in full use, on local residents who live in many areas that were previously isolated. By mid 2003, it was clear that the ADB-funded plan to develop Road 9 into another major thoroughfare in the area, the East West Economic Corridor, was in full swing. Since this regional thoroughfare intersects the Ho Chi Minh highway right at the section where I conducted my dissertation research, this development plan created a unique opportunity for comparative research. Another study was therefore implemented to assess and compare social and public health implications of the two road development schemes, especially for two ethnic minority groups who make up the majority of local residents in communities along or in proximity to the two roads. Three of such communities were selected for comparative purpose: Lao Bao town located on the EWEC and bordered with Lao PDR; Dakrong commune in the intersection between the EWEC and the Ho Chi Minh highway, and A Ngo commune in the Ho Chi Minh highway section. Ethnographers stationed at these sites started data collection in the spring, and will have conducted six extended periods of field work by the end of this year. Beside ethnographic methodology, the study uses survey methods and archival research to collect data necessary to achieve the objectives. Since full analysis of this study will not be available until early next year, I will limit myself in this paper to information on the EWEC that would provide a comparative perspective to the Ho Chi Minh highway space that hosted my dissertation research.

Two spaces of vulnerability, different sets of shaping factors

Geographically, the two roads intersect in the western hinterlands of Quang Tri, one of the poorest provinces located in the central part of Vietnam. It would be difficult for nowadays visitors to imagine that areas along and in proximity to these two roads were hotly contested during the war against America. The province was where lies the infamous 17th parallel that divided the country into two parts for almost two decades. Names such as Khe Sanh Combat Base, Lang Vay Special Force Camp, Ta Con Air Field and the two thoroughfares (Ho Chi Minh Trail and Road 9) have taken up permanent positions in most history books about the war. The two roads, however, are now entering a new chapter in the history of Vietnam as the two major thoroughfares that would ‘bring prosperity to the poor and yet resourceful hinterlands in the central part of Vietnam’⁷.

The Ho Chi Minh highway section where I conducted my dissertation research was upgraded from a severely damaged road that itself was built in the early 1970s as part of the effort to improve the Ho Chi Minh Trail network for the final victory in 1975. This section is a stretch of 60 kilometer long; half of which traversed villages populated mostly by ethnic minority people. Most inhabitants are of the two ethnic minority groups – the Bru-Van Kieu and the Pacoh – that belong to the Mon-Khmer language family in ethnological classification⁸. Villages located along or in proximity to the highway make up six communes in the Vietnam administrative system, and the total population of these communes combined was about 15,000 people. Some villages were established after the initial road was completed in 1973 and but most during the years immediately after the war. During the war, most villagers hide deep in the jungles and many moved to live on the other side of the border where they had their relatives. After the war, the government encouraged ethnic minority groups to settle along the road and implemented many programs to assist new settlements.

Despite enormous amount of assistance from the government, areas along and in proximity to the highway section are considered as among the poorest and least developed areas in the province. Most families have relied economically on traditional slash-and-burn practice and more recently on selling natural forest products to lowland traders. A scheme of gardening and animal husbandry was on trial as soon as new settlements were established, with the hope that this scheme would gradually replace slash-and-burn economy. But this expectation collapsed completely. Villagers have stopped moving residentially, but they have not done so economically. Rather, as often are the cases, they have to travel further away from their home to find spots of hilly land where they can plan new seasons of rice every year, and to search for forests products sellable to lowland traders. This means that economically speaking their lives generally have not improved after they moved to live along the road. Many families were suffering from shortage of rice for more than six months; in many villages fifty percent of households were classified as poor according to the government standards; diseases such as malaria, diarrhea and maternal deaths still plagued the areas. Electricity, running water and simple latrines were not known in the villages until very recently, when the newly built Ho Chi Minh highway opened ways for more investment of the government.

Villages along the road, however, have witnessed other changes in their life. One could easily notice that many traditional materials such as wooden columns and leafy roofs in their house-on-stilts are now replaced by concrete and aluminum materials. Motorbikes have become the favorite means of transportation for villagers as motorbikes have saved them from arduous walk or peddling for long distances. Young people are going at increasing numbers to schools, where they

learn to read and write in Vietnamese and use the same textbooks as their fellows in lowland areas. Most, however, drop out once they finish junior high since the next school levels are not available anywhere near their villages. A couple of years ago, private home-based cinemas powered by small generators where Hong Kong Kungfu and Taiwanese romance movies were shown always attracted large crowds of young people every nights. Now, as electricity is available, youth prefer to watch Korean soap-operas and Vietnam city life, brought closer to home through national television. Consequently, Korean movie stars are no longer strange to them, so hardly are clothing and other-worldly styles of 'modern' Vietnam city dwellers. For the past couple of years, young men like to race motorbikes on the improved road and travel to district and provincial townships, trips that very few of their parents were lucky enough to make once or twice in their entire life. Young women prefer to dress up with clothes of the Viet lowlands (the ethnic majority group in the national census), rather than traditional dress, when they go out at nights. Youth prefer to play tapes recorded with romantic songs of the Viet or Thai that are also popular among young people in large cities, rather than their own traditional lyrics.

Although these changes started to emerge a couple of years before the construction of the highway started, the project actually hastened the process of social change by facilitating the influx of a large number of people from lowland areas into the highway space. The project brought into the areas a couple of thousand road builders; most of them were of the Viet group, and therefore were ethnically different from local ethnic minority residents. It is important to note that not all of them came at the same time. This is partly because the construction was divided into several phases that required different types of workers and labors. Moreover, the turnover among road builders was particularly high. Harsh working conditions, high risk of accidents and sickness (e.g., malaria), no insurance except the mercy of foremen, low productivity leading to low earnings especially during the prolonged raining season were some of the factors that contributed to this high turnout. Migrant labors, together with military conscripts, were at the lowest ladders in the social hierarchy of road builders in the highway space. These two groups did most of the labor intensive work and were most vulnerable to maltreatment by those in the upper ladders of the social hierarchy. Migrant labors, however, still fared much better since they always had the option of leaving without worrying about major consequences⁹. The project, and the presence of a large number of road builders, also brought into the highway space other groups of people, who embodied totally different sets of values and lifestyles and who interacted with local residents and with each other in different ways and for different purposes¹⁰.

Spending time with ethnic minority villagers was one of the main ways for migrant labors to pass their 'non-productive' time¹¹. Very few entertaining options were available for road builders in general and for migrant labors in particular. These options include card playing, drinking, fishing, collecting orchids and other items in the forests, and going to hairdressers, café or karaoke bars in the townships along Road 9 where they could meet sex workers. The last option was not readily available for migrant labors simply because they did not have large amount of cash at hand most of the time. But this option was one of the favorites for managers, foremen and engineers¹², who occasionally took along a couple of confidants among their hired labors as a form of rewarding. Young male labors therefore might have opportunities to visit sex workers in townships along Road 9, but more often they engaged in relationship with young ethnic minority women living in the Ho Chi Minh highway.

This intimate relationship between young male labors and young village women were shaped by a number of factors. Firstly, it is the power differentials between the two groups that were in turn shaped by factors such as ethnicity, education and access to cash which are all attached

to the notion of ‘modernity’. Too often in media channels, ethnic minority groups are portrayed with terms such as ‘backward’ and ‘lack of awareness and knowledge’ and hence compared unfavorably with their fellows in lowland areas. Although to a certain extent these images were not entirely ungrounded, their presence in all representation of ethnic minority groups living in hinterlands impact a deep belief among ethnic minority people that they are no where near the lowland people in terms of ‘civilization’ and ‘modernity’¹³. This difference at the national level entered into the intimate relationship between young male labors and young ethnic minority women to the extent that it privileged the former over the latter. Young male labors, under the eyes of young village women, embodied attributes and values that they did not find in their villages and in their male village fellows.

Secondly, these intimate relationships were facilitated by an attitude toward ‘premarital’ relationship, sexual and otherwise, upheld by ethnic minority people, which is very different from that of the ethnic majority group. For the Viet, the ethnic majority group, young unmarried people engaging in sex has been formally a taboo, especially for young women¹⁴. The usual advice for young Viet, from their parents and the society at large, is to abstain from courtship until they move beyond their teens and to abstain from sex until they get married. For the ethnic minority groups living along the Ho Chi Minh highway, young people traditionally entered into courtship at very young ages, usually at 12 or so years old, and there exists culturally sanctioned institution that supports their early courtship¹⁵. This cultural institution is known under various names in local dialects, but is often referred to as ‘*đi sim*’ in conversations among the Viet lowlanders and between lowlanders and ethnic minority villagers. For most Viet lowlanders who participate in these conversations, ‘*đi sim*’ specifically means that two different-sex individuals could hangout whenever and do whatever they want throughout the night. One kind of story that I often heard from lowlanders was that ‘*đi sim*’ practice often involves sexual intimacy and that young village women often give in fairly quick once they are treated nicely with gifts and/or money. On the contrary, older villagers often expressed their disdain over what happened to their young people, especially the fact that young women were pregnant out-of-wedlock, and often insisted that the connection between ‘*đi sim*’ practice and sex was only introduced when more lowlanders came to their villages¹⁶.

What is known for sure is that migrant labors were not the first and only group that engaged in ‘*đi sim*’ practice since school teachers, lowland traders and local government cadres have actively participated in these activities whenever they have opportunities to spend the nights at the villages. What is also certain is that various traditional regulations and punishing measures that were attached with ‘*đi sim*’ practice to ensure that young couples do not engage in sex, and if they do families would resolve consequences through arranged marriage, have been weakened tremendously over the years. This weakening of a cultural institution was due in large part to various changes in social, cultural and economic lives that I have described above. Consequently, road builders whose relationships with young village women resulted in pregnancy or other unwanted consequences were not held accountable. During the year 2003, my data collection showed that more than 30 young women who reportedly were pregnant with road builders but none ended up getting married with the perpetrators. In one of these cases, where the family and the village of a young Bru-van Kieu woman pressed hard for punishment, the man agreed to get married but later disappeared from the highway space.

Vulnerabilities of various groups in the Ho Chi Minh highway, including road builders like Quang and young ethnic minority women like Hong, were shaped by many structural factors that were pertinent in the space of the highway. A different set of factors shapes vulnerabilities in the

space of EWEC to which I will now turn to. The section of EWEC in Vietnam, better known locally as Road 9, that I am concerned with was the first 50 kilometers starting from Lao Bao – the township in the border with Lao PDR. This section traverses 8 communes and 2 townships populated by more than 40,000 people of three ethnic groups (the Viet, the Bru-Van Kieu and the Pacoh). Unlike the situation in the Ho Chi Minh highway section, more than two third of the population belong to the first ethnic group who reside mostly on the sides of the road. Also, the road and residents along the road (though many of them have not been living there for long) have experienced many transformations that were equally, if not more, significant than the latest project funded by ADB¹⁷.

This project, however, is taking place at a time when movement of people within and through the road is greater than ever. For the past fifteen years or so, areas around the road have become a battle zone between custom service officers and local smugglers, who work hard every day and night to smuggle in hundreds of millions of Vietnamese dong worth of consumer goods produced in Thailand. Smugglers often are the Viet people who live in Lao Bao or Khe Sanh, and they partner with Lao Loum (the Laotian majority group) who occasionally cross and spend the night on the Viet side of the border. Ethnic minority people on both sides of the border, who often have family relationships and ties, are rarely involved in smuggling, with the exception of a small number who worked as carriers along secret paths or at the border gate. Smuggled goods enter into Vietnam through multiple points along the border, and continue their journey to Dong Ha provincial townships in many small passenger vans that are owned by the Viet residents of Lao Bao and Khe Sanh. As many as 120 of such vans are making two trips between Lao Bao and Dong Ha provincial township every day, carrying both people and goods. A large number of truck drivers – as many as 300 trucks passing through Lao Bao border gate everyday – often spend the nights in Lao Bao or Khe Sanh while waiting for custom clearance.

The establishment of Lao Bao Free Economic Zone also attracted hundreds of young women who come from rural lowland areas in the province for better economic opportunities in newly built garment factories. Many of these women engage in intimate relationships with local Viet residents and anecdotal evidence shows that some also work in commercial sex industry on a part-time basis. Since the opening of Lao Bao border gate, local residents have witnessed an increasing number of tourists from Laos, who usually travel on to the provincial township and other tourist localities inside Vietnam. At the present time, the presence of road builders becomes increasingly significant. The contractors that won the bid for the ADB-funded project are companies from North Vietnam, and therefore thousands of road builders are recruited from that part of the country. Last but not least, a recently launched project to build a large-scale hydraulic power factory for the region has drawn several thousands workers, again mostly men, to the area. Initial evidence shows that establishments with ‘hospitality’ women have mushroomed in areas adjacent to the construction site, attracting both workers and a large number of local Viet men.

The increased mobility and complexity of population groups raises significant concerns for local public health authorities about a looming HIV pandemic. Four is currently the reported number of HIV positive among populations living along Road 9, and systematic surveillance has been extremely limited. The first case detected in 1994 was a young woman who worked for a massage parlor in Lao Bao. Few years later, in 1997, a customer officer in Lao Bao showed up at a local hospital with AIDS symptoms, which caused a lot of stir and fear among local population. After the 1997 incidence, local authorities decided to close down all potential commercial sex venues in Lao Bao and Khe Sanh, the two largest and most animated townships along Road 9. In recent years, establishments such as karaoke bars, hairdresser shops, massage parlors, and

restaurants staffed with ‘hospitality’ hostesses, have made gradual return, and commercial sex activities have reemerged, though in more discreet forms. It is expected that the number of such establishments will increase and spread beyond the two townships, and that the profile of customers will be more diverse. Illicit drug use is currently not a public health threat in the area, but there is no guarantee that this will remain to be the case since several drug trafficking cases have been caught and brought to the court in the past couple of years¹⁸.

Although the current number of reported HIV cases is relatively low in comparison to other localities in Vietnam, the above analysis shows that the concerns for a looming HIV epidemic in areas along the EWEC were not unwarranted. The first HIV vulnerability mapping along Highway 1 in Vietnam stretched itself to include Lao Bao as one of the so-called ‘hotspots’ (Uhrig, 2000). Similarly, several international donors and organizations, including ADB, CARE International and Nordic Assistance Volunteers (NAV) have stepped in with intervention schemes to prevent (pending) HIV/AIDS spread in this area. When compared to the Ho Chi Minh highway space it is clear that if the criteria is the number of ‘hotspots’ then living along the EWEC makes one more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. This epidemiologically sound conclusion, however, does not make sense in the case of Quang who got infected with STIs not from his visits to sex workers in the EWEC, but rather from his relationship with an ethnic minority woman on the Ho Chi Minh highway space. Why this is the case?

Displacement, ‘familiar space’ and vulnerability

*“...to live is to live locally, to know is first of all to know the places [sic] one is in”
(Edward Casey cited in Escobar, 2000: 163)*

To answer this question, the analysis of contextual factors presented above is not enough. Rather we need to turn our attention to factors that are pertinent to individual labors like Quang. And yet, it is not the conventional explanations (such as lack of knowledge or awareness of HIV/AIDS) that we should resort to. Rather the insight from Lefebvre tells us that we need to understand ways in which migrant labors imagine and understand space, and live in space according to their understanding of it. In anthropology, a discipline that for long has associated itself methodologically with ‘village’ or ‘community’, recent critics have called for greater emphasis on deconstructing the naturalness and boundaries of such seemingly bounded space (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a, 1997b; Malkki, 1995; Marcus, 1995). Gupta and Ferguson make this point most clearly when they argue that anthropology “must turn away from the commonsense idea that such things as locality and community are simply given or natural and turn towards a focus on *social and political processes of place making, conceived less as a matter of ‘ideas’ than of embodied practices* that shape identities and enable resistances” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 6, my emphasis). Instead of taking ‘the local’ as given and then moving to ask questions about what happening in ‘the local’, they further suggest, anthropologists much start with another question: How are understanding of locality [and space] formed and lived? An analysis in this direction is the focus of this section, which is aimed to explore what make Quang and his fellow labors at risk.

It is important first to understand that migrant labors chose to move out of their home villages under circumstances that were often beyond their control. Tinh, 19 years old, shared his experience

(Giang: Tell me about a significant event in your life?) I still remember that in 1995 when my mother gave birth to her last child, my youngest brother now, all villagers were very hungry. Most families didn't have enough rice to eat, you know, so we often mixed rice with bananas or cassava. I started to understand my duty as the eldest child that I would have to do something to help my family when I grew up...Then it came the new school year. I was trying my best to ask my parents for money [to pay school fees] but I was still short of 20,000 VND. The teacher threatened to kick me off in front of the class. I was angry and talked back to her, and then decided to never go back to school again. The year after that I started to work for a small brick-making factory in the district, and was paid 10,000 per day. When I was 16, I went to Hanoi for the first time in my life to work as a cook and brick layer in one construction site. It was just because of my family difficult situations (*điều kiện khó khăn*) that I was not able to grow up and study (*ăn học*) as much as others.

Tính's extended explanation called our attention to several issues. One is the two major reasons that he attributed to for his decision to drop out from school and migrate for work. They were the severe poverty that his family and others in his village suffered from and the strictly imposed school fees that his insensitive teacher was supposed to reinforce. The other is that Tính lamented his inability to keep up in terms of educational level, which put him at a far inferior position in terms of ability to find a better job (less labor intensive and better pay) when compared to other young people that he met or knew. This, furthermore, made it difficult for him to fulfill his duties as the eldest son in the family.

The experience of Tính was not unique. In the group that I worked with, none finish senior high school; most of them dropped out while they were in or right after they finished junior high; few cases didn't even finish elementary school. In the home village, my household survey showed that more than 60 percent of young people of the age range 20 to 29 had their educational levels at junior high or lower. Stories similar to that of Tính were given to explain why children dropped out of school. This trend, however, was not unique for the home village of the migrant labors. In 1986, the policy of Renovation (also known as *Đổi Mới*) was embarked by the government. Among many things, this policy relegated the burden of paying for school fees to individual households. And while other economic reform policies were introduced as well, positive effects of these economic policies took time to make up for consequences of the abrupt introduction of school fees and costs. Consequently, a large number of children dropped out from schools during the period immediately following the introduction of *Đổi Mới*. Although the scale and timeframe of this phenomenon vary in different areas of the country, depending on coping capacity of communities and households, the phenomenon was widespread (Glewwe & Jabocoy, 2002; World Bank, 1997)¹⁹.

Renovation policy, thus, unwittingly disfranchised a large number of young people, including both men and women, of the cohort that was coming of age during and around the time when the policy was introduced. More significantly, these young people are now entering their adulthood and yet are not equipped with necessary credentials and skills to fulfill responsibilities that their families and communities expect them to do. For example, one of the common complains among migrant labors in my study was about their difficulties in finding a suitable young women to get married with. Ngoan, a 25 year old man who dropped out of elementary school at the 3rd grade, explained his situation:

(Giang: Tell me about your love experiences?) About that, there are many difficulties. Concerning my dream of family, I have had a number of loves, but they didn't work out. [Giang: Could you tell me why?] It was because, as people often said, poor men like us have many difficulties in getting married. It is true, we also think about it a lot, and we

think that we have to try our best (*phấn đấu*) [to improve our family's economy] because we are very poor. Marriage was mentioned many times in conversations with my family, but there are many puzzles and barriers (*lúng túng*) such as our family conditions and problems with my own family [his parents divorced due to his father negligence of the family]. And many people don't want their daughters getting married with me because they feared that I would be like my father. Now I am 25 years old and I know it's time to get married, but there are many difficulties. It is difficult to get married with the one I love, for those I don't it is not very difficult. Also, as you know, we never stay in any place for long. So we don't have enough time know and understand (*tìm hiểu*) anyone.

Although the concerns of Tính and Ngoan are different in some aspects, they converge at one important point: that is their inability to fulfill responsibility towards their family as a maturing son. I would, therefore, argue that young men like Tính and Ngoan are not only spatially displaced as migrant labors, but also socially 'displaced' as 'failed' sons and (potential) husbands within their own families and communities (Le, nd). In the unified nation that they were laboring for, their standing and contributions were severely limited because of their inability to compete socially and economically with other groups of men. Although young male migrant labors didn't necessarily use the term 'displacement' in their conversation and explanation, they are acutely aware of their 'displaced' positions, both spatially and socially, and explicitly voice their concerns about the consequences of 'displacement' on their own identity and life.

Writing about "psychiatric implications of displacement," the American psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove notes that displacement is potentially detrimental to mental health since each of the three psychological processes of being in place (attachment, familiarity, and place identity) "is threatened by displacement, and the problems of nostalgia, disorientation, and alienation may ensue" (Fullilove, 1996: 1516). Drawing from Fullilove's analysis, I want to posit here that it is important for migrant labors in my study, particularly as individuals with heightened sense of spatial and social displacement, to construct their own sense of emplacement in whenever new spaces that they travel through or live in. This sense of emplacement is constructed first and foremost by developing 'familiarity' or "detailed cognitive knowledge" of spaces that they are in (Fullilove, 1996: 1516). It is easier for them, however, to develop this sense of 'familiarity' in spaces that resemble more of their home village, the space that they are most familiar with. In this regard, being in the rural-like space of Ho Chi Minh highway was an advantage for migrant labors in my study than being in the urban-like space of townships along the EWEC.

In her research on sexuality and experiences of abortion among urban youth in Hanoi City, the anthropologist Tine Gammeltoft notes that her respondents find urban space as one that is often characterized by instability and insecurity, and for them "the 'city' seems to become...a condensed conceptual image of their fears of moral anomie and social superficiality" (Gammeltoft, 2002: 484). This conceptualization of the urban space is very similar to what young male migrant labors in my study felt while being in urban spaces. As I traveled with migrant labors through different spaces – including Hanoi, semi-urban and rural areas – I was able to observe their contrasting mannerisms in those spaces. One of their chief complains were that urban people were not 'friendly' and often look down on them, and that everything in urban spaces are costly. If it was easier for them to make friends and to go exploring things in rural spaces, it is a lot harder for them to do so in urban areas. If they could relax and quickly master the codes of conduct in rural areas, it is a lot more difficult for them to do so in urban ones. Some migrant labors in my study felt victims of thieves and other scams when they were not able to learn quickly how to live safely in urban areas. Urban spaces, in the view

of migrant labors, carry more excitements, and yet also more risks, and therefore are never their kind of space to master.

Migrants' ability to develop their sense of familiarity and mastery in a new space depends also on relative power positions that they have over other groups of people who are also present in the same space. As mentioned earlier, migrant labors and soldiers were at the lowest positions in the power hierarchy of road builders on the Ho Chi Minh highway space. This is not only because of administrative hierarchy, but also because the kinds of work that migrant labors and soldiers do are not highly valued, from both social and cultural perspectives, as compared to the kind of work that engineers, technicians, and managers do. Migrant labors, often referred to in daily talk as well as official media as 'manual labors' or 'ordinary labors' (*lao động chân tay* or *lao động phổ thông*), are perceived as those who only use hands and physical strength rather than brain and intellectual power in their work. Under the eyes of many young ethnic minority women, however, migrant labors embody values and attributes that make them far more desirable than many ethnic minority men in the highway space. Migrant labors in the group told me many times that it was 'easy' for them to ask ethnic minority women for a night out and to persuade these women into sexual intimacies. On the contrary, it was far more difficult for them to do so with urban girls, even to the extent that they would have doubts had urban girls approached them, as explained in the words of Tinh:

(Giang: Tell me about a most memorable experience for you since you have been out working?) Most favorable memory for me was when I worked in Hanoi, near the...Hotel. The foreman had two daughters, one had a lover named Hung and the other was in the 8th grade. The younger daughter liked me very much. She bought me a shirt as souvenir when I left the group. She asked me to go out with her on Saturdays when our group had days off. We went to ice cream shop near the Hoan Kiem Lake, and then spent time on the benches at lakeside. She leaned on me or touched me all the time. I was stupefied and didn't know what to do.

Tinh's recall of his experience in Hanoi was quite a contrast with what he and his fellow labors describe about their relationship with women on the highway space. Representing young ethnic minority women as 'easy' when it comes to sexual matters serves as a 'technology of power' for ethnic majority men to establish their domination over ethnic minority people. This 'technology of power' has been discussed extensively in literature (see especially Stoler, 2002 for discussion regarding the use of discourses on sexuality and gender as 'technology of power' in colonial regimes in Southeast Asia). I further want to point out here that 'imagining' young ethnic minority women as easier to manage also gives migrant labors a sense of assurance about their familiarity and mastery over the Ho Chi Minh highway space and things in it.

This imagined sense of familiarity and mastery gave migrant labors in my study an imagined sense of safety. This is because, as noted by Fullilove, "the familiar environment, in part because it can be taken for granted, is a source of ease and comfort. The unfamiliar environment evokes "fight or flight" responses, especially a heightened awareness of danger and attention to details in the surrounding" (Fullilove, 1996: 1518). Being at ease in a 'familiar' space where one feels that one could manage made it more likely for migrant labors like Quang to engage in behaviors that they would not have in urban-like space of townships along the EWEC. Unprotected sex with young ethnic minority women was just one of many risky practices that they have engaged in, besides participating in games hunting activities organized by local villagers, riding motorbikes at night on a bumpy and unlighted road and drinking excessively. They were not aware that migrant labors who had come to the highway space before them had engaged in similar unsafe behaviors, and possibly

brought STIs to young ethnic minority woman like Hong. The fact that condoms were not readily available in the Ho Chi Minh highway space made migrant labors in my study more vulnerable. Nevertheless, even if condoms had been available I am not sure that they would have used condoms in their sexual relationships with young ethnic minority women. This is because using condoms in a relationship that they felt they could manage would take away the sense of safety which was so essential to make their being and living in the Ho Chi Minh highway space at ease and comfortable²⁰. The sense of safety that migrant labors constructed was part and parcel of what living in the Ho Chi Minh highway meant to them.

Conclusion: The Irony of Agency in Space

In this paper, I first attempt to analyze vulnerabilities to sexually transmitted infections in the two interconnected highways in the central part of Vietnam. Vulnerabilities in these two spaces have been shaped by many structural factors at the local, regional and national levels, of which mobility and development are only parts of the equation. This analysis shows that epidemiologically speaking living in the rural-like space of the Ho Chi Minh highway makes one less at risk than living in the urban-like space of the East West Economic Corridor. The experiences of migrant labors in my study, however, proved otherwise. They were at risk of getting infected with STIs from their unprotected relationship with local ethnic minority women, rather than from their visits to sex workers in the EWEC. To explain this somewhat unexpected situation, I argue that it is not the issue of knowledge deficiency on the part of migrant labors we should turn to. Rather we should pay attention to the ways they imagined and interpreted the two spaces based on their past experiences and ways in which they lived in those spaces according to their understanding and interpretation. This means that comparing mechanisms of vulnerabilities in the two spaces and to discuss the spaces in abstract terms, such as 'space of vulnerability' or 'hot spots', is not enough. I therefore go further to show that migrant labors – as individuals with heightened sense of being spatially and socially displaced – constructed their emplacement through developing 'familiarity' and sense of mastery over the new space. However, this 'sense of mastery' in a 'familiar' space like the Ho Chi Minh highway was what made migrant labors engage in behaviors that they would have not under other circumstances. Migrant labors in my study, therefore, were active both in constructing the Ho Chi Minh highway space and in constructing their own vulnerability to STIs. They exercised their agency in the new space, but under circumstances clearly not of their choosing and hence the irony of agency in space.

In the framework of analysis that I have presented, structural factors that shape vulnerability in space are important. But more important are ways that individual migrants interact with spaces not only as a function of the structure of the space in which they are living but also how they interpret that space based on past experience and act upon that interpretation. By paying greater attention to both contextual factors and individual agency of migrants, one would shift the focus from delineating 'space of vulnerability' to understanding 'vulnerability in space' or, in Lefebvre's conceptualization, from observing things in space to examining the production of space. The increasing focus in programming that identifies 'hot spots' based on structural characteristics and then focuses program efforts on those 'hot spots', ignores the ways in which men (and women) with different experiences, interact differently in space. While 'hot spots' may be areas in which some men might engage in unsafe behaviors, for other groups of men their experiences may mean that they are less likely to engage in unsafe behaviors in 'hot spots' but more likely to engage in unsafe behaviors in spaces that might be considered, structurally, low risk. Vulnerability in space,

therefore, differs markedly for different groups living in the same space. For example, vulnerability for migrant labors in my study was clearly not the same as that of their foremen and managers. So it is important that programs differentiate among groups in terms of how they perceive the space in which they live, in particular in their interactions with other groups occupying the space. Program that fail to take these differences into account might not be able to reach those who are at greater risk of sexually transmitted infections. This in turn requires that programs base their development on a thorough understanding of the spaces in which they are working, and not just a mapping of structural factors that might designate a place as a 'hot spot'.

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Endnotes

¹ The labors used slang ‘cháy ống khói’ (literally means ‘his chimney was burned’), often used to refer to STIs suffered by men, to describe Quang’s problem.

² I decided to take Quang to an assistant doctor who was in charge of health services for the company that the migrant labors worked for. After hearing the symptoms and history, the assistant doctor immediately knew what he should do and gave Quang an antibiotic shot. The helpful assistant doctor later told me that Quang was not the only migrant labor who had STIs so he already had some doses of special antibiotic in stock. Concerning Hong, it took time for me to persuade local health workers that they needed to approach Hong for further testing and treatment. Finally, I was able to do that, but only after the group left the highway. During one of my return trips to the highway, I was informed by local health workers that Hong already got married with a ethnic minority man from another district.

³ I also lived in the highway section for two months in the summer of 2001 to conduct a pre-dissertation fieldwork that led to the development of my dissertation topic and proposal.

⁴ This was another challenge that I met while working on the highway. Although I was able to build warm relationships with some managers to obtain approval to go around and meet with different groups of migrant labors hired by their companies, my relationships with managers were never warm enough to the extent that I felt comfortable soliciting interviews with managers.

⁵ Just in the past eighteen months several young men in the group had moved to work in five different sites, and the longest stay in any of those sites for some was less than two months. Few men of the group left road building career to find other jobs that they consider as more rewarding and stable. A couple of young men whom I had interviews with for the first time after they left the highway told me that they already had other plans for their life.

⁶ I spent my first month to visit six companies contracted to build different portions of the highway section, and introduced myself to all migrant labor groups hired by those companies. At the end of this first month, I was able to select the group of migrant labors. I then spent the next two months with the group on the highway section until they completed their work. After that, I returned to the highway section from time to time, while following the group to other new work sites and frequenting their home village. In total, I spent about 6 months in the highway prior to the implementation of the study on EWEC, much shorter than what I had planned for.

⁷ The construction of the Ho Chi Minh national highway has been funded entirely by the government of Vietnam. The current phase of this project, building the first stretch of 1,300 kilometers of this 1,800 kilometers long highway, started in the year 2000 and would be completed by the fall of 2004, at the estimated cost of no less than 500 million US dollars. Being the second largest development project in recent years in Vietnam, this highway project represents emerging nationalist economic policies in the race to become one of the regional ‘Tiger’ economies, a highly masculinized vision of economic development. From the government’s point of view, the highway symbolizes the right path to a brighter future for Vietnam that builds on a heroic past of the nation. The highway, covering the vast and resourceful Western corridor that hosts an array of ethnic groups and runs through many regions of the country, would also ensure the nation’s unity and security. The project at times attracted more than 50,000 workers and labors, mostly young men, who came from all parts of the country.

⁸ I do not use the term ‘hill tribes’ that are often used in media and scholarly materials to refer to ethnic minority groups living in Southeast Asia and elsewhere since they are not officially used in Vietnam.

⁹ Many groups of migrant labors that I met in the highway space were not able to keep their hired hands for more than three months. The group that I worked with was rare in the sense that they were able to keep most of the labors for the entire period of their stay on the highway. The fact that several members of the group have worked with the foreman for a few years, and that the fathers of two labors also used to work for the foreman attested to the stability in the structure of this group. One factor explained this stability is that the wife of the foreman was originally also from the same village with most migrant labors, and she was friends or relatives of the parents. This kind of connection was important in giving some sense of security when the labors joined the group, and in ensuring that the maltreatment, one of the main reasons for labors leaving the group, was kept to minimal.

¹⁰ Many restaurants, ranging from a small shop specialized in dog meat to restaurants catering large parties, mushroomed along the still-under-construction highway within a period of less than six months. These restaurants and shops were established by lowland people who came to make some profits out of the presence of a large number of road builders. Sex workers and day traders also came to take advantage of a large number of potential clients but they often didn't stay in the highway section on a long term basis since there were no establishments that host them. Recently, after the highway construction was completed, other groups have come to take benefit of the improved road. Lowland farmers have settled to take advantage of cheap and highly productive land; traders have come with empty trucks to buy natural forest products such as rattan, fire wood, banana collected by ethnic minority residents at very low prices; and recently gold miners have arrived and hired local residents to work or to carry goods and food for them from the road to the mines located deep in the jungle.

¹¹ Migrant labors in the study often use terms such as 'thời gian nhàn rỗi' or 'chơi không', which often mean time during which they don't engage in any activities that are paid. Road builders that I worked with were paid only for those days that they engage in work. Otherwise, they were provided only food and shelters. A young man who worked in the group could earn in average 25,000 VND (equivalent of less than 2 USD) per working day. The number of productive days only accounted for less than two third of the time that they actually spent on the highway, due to various reasons such as rain, delayed supply of materials, broken machines. Unlike other labor regimes also current in the country, for example in the South, most road builders that I met in the highway only received their pays twice a year – once around mid-year so that they could help their families to pay for taxes due at the end of the spring harvest season; the other at the end of the lunar calendar year so that they could help their families with expenses during Tet (the traditional New Year). Although they could receive advance from foremen for incident expenses, they usually abstain from doing so since they worry about saving enough money for the above-mentioned two occasions.

¹² As far as I knew, almost all managers, foremen and engineers didn't have intimate relationships with village women whom they often described as 'dirty' or 'lowly'. They therefore considered these women no where near their rank. Besides sex workers whom they bought sexual services, they really made efforts to woo other groups of women such as school teachers and lowland settlers but often did not succeed.

¹³ These terms, or *văn minh* and *hiện đại* in Vietnamese, are often used in Vietnam to refer to levels of development and modernization that are aspired by the government as its ultimate goal for all social and ethnic groups. I often heard ethnic minority villagers compared themselves with lowland people in those terms.

¹⁴ Although this attitude has faced increasing challenges during the past couple of decades as a reportedly significant number of unwanted pregnancy and abortion were happening among unmarried women (Gammeltoft & Thang, 1999), it remains one of the cornerstones of moral and social codes that mainstream society uses to govern young people's life.

¹⁵ Each Bru-Van Kieu village has one 'sim' house where young single women gather at night and young men come there to meet their suitors. After spending some time with the group, couples could leave the house and be on their own throughout the night. Usually this house is owned by a widow or a divorced woman who have knowledge about marriage life and sex that are valuable to young single women. The Pacoh does not have this kind of house, so young people often hang out in public spaces, such as the highway, and then couples break from the larger group.

¹⁶ Due to limited space, I do not discuss in this paper various opinions and reactions of villagers, including young men and women, towards the relationship between young women and road builders as well as the fact that more young women got pregnant out-of-wedlock while the highway was under construction than ever before.

¹⁷ The history of Road 9 dated back to the late 19th century when the Nguyen Dynasty decided to build a dirt road out of jungle paths used by the Bru-Van Kieu and the Pacoh to trade with the Viet in lowland areas. After the French established their colony in Vietnam, in early 20th century they started to build an asphalted road as a strategic link between Vietnam and other countries in Indochina. By 1921, the construction was completed, and the road took on its form and name, as we know it today. By this time, the French had also moved a large number of Viet people from lowland areas to two major plantations-cum-townships in Khe Sanh and Tan Lam. During much of the 20 years of Vietnam – American War, Road 9 neither received many Viet civilians, nor had the road any major reconstruction until 1967 when the American decided to upgrade it for the last showdown in Khe Sanh in 1968. After the war, Road 9

witnessed a major rehabilitation in 1977, when the Vietnamese government decided to move a large number of Viet people from lowland areas in Quang Tri to settle down in the hilly terrain along the road, as part of the national plan to establish new economic zones. In 1985, the road was upgraded, and again witnessed more Viet civilians moving to settle in. The road received a major face lifting during the period from 1995 to 1998, with funding from the government of Vietnam, when it appeared to become a critical part of the East-West Economic Corridor. In 2000, Lao Bao was approved by the government to become a Free Trade Economic Zone, and ever since has been awarded about 6 billion Vietnam Dongs (or 400,000 US dollars) annually for building new infrastructure.

¹⁸ The number of injecting drug users in the area is reportedly very few and they acquired their drug habits while living in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh cities. Despite the fact that Road 9 is a major route for smuggling activities between Laos and Vietnam, few cases of drug trafficking have been reported and, so far, no credible explanations have been given to this somehow unexpected situation. It should be noted that the central part of Vietnam has seen relatively low number of injecting drug users and drug trafficking incidents as compared to the two other regions in Vietnam. And since injecting drug use has been a major factor fuelling the HIV epidemic in the country, provinces in the central part also have relatively low numbers of reported HIV cases.

¹⁹ Despite the fact that this phenomenon has been discussed in literature, I have not been able to track down statistics that show the extent and variability of this important phenomenon.

²⁰ Not using condoms as a strategy to maintain relationship has been discussed extensively in literature. See, for example,