



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

CARGC Papers

Center for Advanced Research in Global  
Communication (CARGC)

---

11-2020

## Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam's Digital Mamasphere

Giang Nguyen-Thu  
t.nguyen72@uq.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/cargc\\_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/cargc_papers)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nguyen-Thu, Giang, "Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam's Digital Mamasphere" (2020). *CARGC Papers*. 14.  
[https://repository.upenn.edu/cargc\\_papers/14](https://repository.upenn.edu/cargc_papers/14)

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/cargc\\_papers/14](https://repository.upenn.edu/cargc_papers/14)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam’s Digital Mamasphere

## Description

CARGC Paper 14, “Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam’s Digital Mamasphere,” by Giang Nguyen-Thu explores the temporal entanglements of care and precarity in Vietnam by unpacking the condition of “hectic slowness” experienced by mothers who sell food on Facebook against the widespread fear of dietary intoxication. Crafted during Nguyen-Thu’s CARGC Postdoctoral Fellowship, originally presented as a CARGC Colloquium, and drawing on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork with Vietnamese mothers, CARGC Paper 14 paper offers an incredibly nuanced and fine-grained engagement with the everyday digital practices of Vietnamese mothers and grandmothers in cities such as Hanoi. This grounded attention to digital life and motherhood is, then, entered in productive dialogue with feminist and media scholarship in order to build a rich analysis that challenges our continued reliance on Western-centric notions such as autonomy to make sense of care, mothering, and media practices.

## Keywords

precarity, care, Vietnam, digital media, Facebook, motherhood

## Disciplines

Communication

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

# Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam's Digital Mamasphere





It is my distinct pleasure to introduce CARGC Paper 14, “Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam’s Digital Mamasphere” by Giang Nguyen-Thu. Giang joined CARGC as a 2018-2020 Postdoctoral Fellow and is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Queensland in Australia. She completed her PhD in 2016 at the University of Queensland with a focus on television and nationalism in post-Reform Vietnam. Prior to joining CARGC, she was a lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University in Hanoi. Her book *Television in Post-Reform Vietnam: Nation, Media, Market* (Routledge, 2019) is the first monograph in English about contemporary Vietnamese media. Her current work explores the gendered politics of precarity in late-socialist Vietnam through different case studies of digital motherhood.

CARGC Paper 14 makes several important contributions to the study of digital media and its relations to the gendered politics of global precarity. It proposes the notion of *hectic slowness* to unpack the complex and often competing claims made by digital media onto young mothers in Vietnam. At a time when food, education, and healthcare are becoming increasingly more expensive, young Vietnamese mothers such as Hoa, on which the paper’s analysis centers, turn to the digital marketplace on Facebook to

supplement their otherwise limited incomes. Reflective of growing anxieties around the quality of foods available in Vietnamese cities, many young mothers – ‘traders-caregivers’ as Giang calls them – focus their forays into the digital marketplace on selling “clean” and healthy foods, which they import directly from relatives in the Vietnamese countryside. In their pursuit of flexible money online, these young traders-caregivers juggle often contradictory and intensified working and mothering loads. In the process, they find themselves in the middle of a “frenetic stuckness,” constantly responding to the demands of maintaining successful online ventures, whilst their days are shaped by the slow rhythms of caring for young children. *Hectic slowness*, then, offers a way of making sense of experiences of precarity, affective labor, and changing temporalities in the digital age.

CARGC Paper 14 draws on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork with Vietnamese mothers and grandmothers in Hanoi (July 2016 – July 2018; April 2019 – August 2019), which Giang conducted in part during her fellowship at CARGC. The paper offers an incredibly nuanced and fine-grained engagement with the everyday digital practices of Vietnamese mothers and grandmothers in cities such as Hanoi. This grounded attention to digital life and motherhood is, then, entered in productive dialogue with feminist and media scholarship in order to build a rich analysis that challenges

our continued reliance on Western-centric notions such as autonomy to make sense of care, mothering, and media practices. In CARGC Paper 14, Giang deftly mobilizes her ethnographic engagements with local practices to offer an analysis steeped in the Vietnamese context but which resonates far beyond – a thoroughly compelling example of the translocal approach CARGC advocates.

CARGC Paper 14 invites us to “think with care” in order to challenge dominant understandings of precarity that reproduce the persistent universalizing masculinist view of labor and ignores feminist scholarship on care and emotional labor. In doing so, the paper makes a highly original contribution by centering the analysis not on mothers *per se* but rather on motherhood. This invites the inclusion of the voices of grandmothers as well as mothers, thus, thinking through generations and change. As Giang notes, “the insights offered by caregiving experiences of the older generation also enable [her] to look away from the obsession with autonomy to learn about agentic arrangement of care in places where the shared condition of vulnerability has long been taken as the starting point of an ethical life, instead of the cancellation of such.” The paper is a perfect example of our current work on the digital and continued engagement with the geopolitics of popular cultures, two key research themes at CARGC.

Academic year 2020-2021 – known at CARGC as #CARGC2021 – is proving to be a busy year. In addition to the pressures from finding ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, continued ecological disaster, and protests against systemic racism and police brutality, July 2020 also marked the departure of CARGC founder Marwan M. Kraidy, who has moved on to become the Dean and CEO of Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q). Whilst we could not be prouder of what Marwan has achieved at CARGC, of his legacy, and of his new role at Northwestern University in Qatar, the news is also bittersweet for CARGC and does mean that we are in a period of transition. Regardless, and thanks in no small part of our incredible team and talented fellows, we are forging ahead. In August, we welcomed two new postdoctoral fellows, Jinsook Kim and Hana Masri, whose work on feminist activism in South Korea and the politics of waste in borderlands in Mexico, Palestine, and Lebanon respectively, is both imaginative and ground-breaking. We have a full program of (virtual) events, including book talks and colloquia, on topics ranging from tech labor in Ghana, Chinese soft power in Africa to cross-border media flows in Afghanistan and feminist digital activism in South Korea, to name but a few. In April 2021, we will host our biennial early career conference entitled “No Going Back: Global Communication and Post-Pandemic Politics,” a global conference

led by our fellows and focused on new, innovative, and multimodal scholarship. In November, we will open our annual call for postdoctoral fellows for 2021-2023. Finally, in Spring 2020, we invited a diverse group of global media scholars at all stages of their careers from doctoral students to leading scholars to serve on our newly-founded advisory board, chaired in its inaugural two years by Michael X. Delli Carpini (Annenberg

School for Communication). We had our first board meeting in September, and already new ideas for initiatives and collaborative projects are emerging from this hugely inspiring and committed group. Stay tuned! And, in the meantime, please check out our [website](#) for events and updates!



**Clovis Bergère**

Assistant Director for Research

**Center for Advanced Research in  
Global Communication (CARGC)**

**Annenberg School for  
Communication**

**University of Pennsylvania**



**GIANG  
NGUYEN-THU**

Postdoctoral  
Research Fellow  
Institute for  
Advanced Studies in  
the Humanities  
The University of  
Queensland

*This CARGC Paper  
explores the temporal  
entanglements of care and  
precarity in Vietnam by  
unpacking the condition  
of “hectic slowness”  
experienced by mothers who  
sell food on Facebook against  
the widespread fear of  
dietary intoxication.*

## Hectic Slowness: Precarious Temporalities of Care in Vietnam's Digital Mamasphere

### INTRODUCTION

This CARGC Paper explores the temporal entanglements of care and precarity in Vietnam by unpacking the condition of “hectic slowness” experienced by mothers who sell food on Facebook against the widespread fear of dietary intoxication. These trader-caregivers’ slowness is defined by not an absence of activity but an overwhelming pressure of childrearing chores, casualized jobs, and intensified insecurities. At the center of this frantic inescapability is the caregiving “heart” (*tâm*) in the digital race when a mother carries multiplied burdens while trying to move forward at the screen’s scrolling speed. Young mothers’ hectic slowness, however, is wired into an alternative temporality of the grandmothers, who effectively offer their care but remain largely out-of-sync with both the digital race and the accused “backwardness.” The continuities of precarized care across generations prove the need to learn from the long history of agencies and vulnerabilities of care before the neoliberal turn, in Vietnam and beyond.

### HOA

Hoa<sup>1</sup> finally invited me to her place in Hanoi on a Monday in January 2018 after several failed attempts to set a date, due to her over-scheduled timetable. She was working from home. “My son was just released from the hospital after a lung infection. The cough lingers, so I am keeping him with me for a few more days.” Before welcoming me into her tiny apartment on the fifth floor of an old apartment building, Hoa showed me a small balcony garden, where I saw basil, mint, and some green vegetables. “These dark leaves are for my son, but they have been growing too slowly, so I rely mainly on my mother’s vegetables sent from Lào Cai [400 km away from Hanoi].” As we squeezed together in the narrow hallway-turned-kitchen to prepare lunch with her small son fumbling around, I found myself astonished by the amount of labor invested in securing “clean food” [*thực phẩm sạch*] for a casual meal: steamed rice “sourced by Grandmom from high mountain fields,” pork “hand-picked by Grandmom from countryside markets,” and *giò* (traditional Vietnamese pork sausage) that “Grandmom ordered without any MSG or chemicals.” Hoa told me with a hint of pride: “I eat the same produce that I sell online. Running this Facebook store brings me a better cash flow, you know, some ‘money in money out’ [*đồng ra đồng vào*], while also keeping my son away from the ‘dirty food’ [*thực phẩm bẩn*] sold *everywhere* in the open market.”

1 Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

In her early thirties, Hoa is a frantically busy mother of a three-year-old son. She sells food on Facebook while also working fulltime as junior staff for a local NGO in Hanoi. I added Hoa as a Facebook friend in January 2017. Soon I became a regular customer of her Facebook store, which sells countryside produce ranging from rice, pork, beef, chicken, seafood, and vegetables to a variety of cooked meals. Each time I placed an order, we extended our conversation beyond food to other issues—breastfeeding and respiratory infections—topics around which we instantly bonded as our sons were born at almost the same time. Knowing that I was involved with the development sector as a “consultant,” Hoa explained that her local NGO paid her much less than the standard salary at other well-known “international” organizations, especially when brutal funding cuts were threatening many development projects. After running into each other at various NGO events, our online friendship extended into offline discussions. Hoa often apologized for being “busier than expected” when she would have to cut short some of our chats. “I’m running back and forth [*chạy đi chạy lại*] between the two jobs while trying to nurse my son as much as possible.”

Hoa is one among thousands of Vietnamese women who participate in the nascent, yet thriving, “mamasphere” of Facebook-based petty trading, where most sellers are mothers of small children. These retailers, who are often slightly referred to as “those online trading moms” (*máy mẹ bán hàng online*), have become so prominent that they threaten major e-commerce platforms (Hà 2018). Unlike “traditional” petty traders who are usually anchored to a physical market (Leshkovich 2014), online trading moms form a “virtual” collectivity that is fundamentally conditioned by the recent, albeit pervasive, availability of digital platforms and infrastructures in Vietnam, most typically broadband Internet, smartphones, Facebook, and 3G services.

The lives of these trader-caregivers are marked by unique entanglements of care and precarity. Young women take major entrepreneurial risks and push their own lives to the limit for the sake of establishing networks of clean food provision to care for children. This is apparent in Hoa’s “back and forth” movements when she juggles with intensified working and mothering loads, online and offline. Being a youth who has “escaped” a background of rural poverty to migrate to the capital city and secure a job in the highly regarded development sector, Hoa’s profile exemplifies the aspirational dream of upward mobility driven by the country’s recent economic growth. However, Hoa’s decision to start trading food on Facebook, which clearly distracts her from her career goals, is not motivated by youthful aspirations; it is driven by the new duties and insecurities attached to the birth of her son. At a time when food, education, and healthcare in Hanoi are getting more expensive each year, Hoa turns to the digital marketplace afforded by Facebook to maintain the “in and out” of flexible money on top of her fixed and limited fulltime salary. This strategy of financial flexibilization and diversification, a typical form of neoliberal precarity, becomes possible thanks to Hoa’s business sensitivity to the escalating sense of collective vulnerability related to “dirty food”—a new social reality in Vietnam after the 1986 Reform (Ehlert & Faltmann 2019). The extra income, which is conveniently coupled

*At a time when food, education, and healthcare in Hanoi are getting more expensive each year, Hoa turns to the digital marketplace afforded by Facebook to maintain the “in and out” of flexible money on top of her fixed and limited fulltime salary.*



with a relief from “dirty food,” allows Hoa to sustain her newly achieved middle-class living standards for a now larger family. Grounded in her ethical commitment to sell the same “clean” produce that she feeds her beloved son, Hoa’s online business is constituted by and constitutive of her mothering subjectivity, centered on the labor of maternal love. Hoa’s economic, emotional, and digital investment in casual food trading, in turn, prevents her from fully engaging in her main profession as an NGO worker.

This CARGC Paper explores what I term “hectic slowness,” the sense of being in a rush and in a rut at the same time. Turning to digital platforms to seek flexible and productive arrangements between work and care, Hoa aspires to fantasies of middle-class stability, autonomy, and distinction, only to find herself exhausted in the middle of frenetic “stuckness.” This paradoxical condition of immobilized motion reveals the contradictions of the impasse (Berlant 2011, 4) whereby mothering life is crammed with endless stimulations, contradictory desires, and constant mobilities, while simultaneously feeling like it is heading nowhere. It is precisely this closed circuit where care and work both enable and cancel each other out that reproduces neoliberal precarity along the gender axis.

Hoa’s location in “hectic slowness,” however, is still a practice of middle-class privilege. Her dithering struggle to maintain balance is built on deeper layers of invisible care labor by her own mother and many less privileged women who join Hoa’s trading networking as logistic workers and local food producers. The life story of Hoa’s mother is thus entangled with Hoa’s—a counterpoint that unveils the intergenerational history of caregiving exploitations and agencies long before the neoliberal turn. This history is unique to Vietnam in some ways but resonates with stories across the Global South (Can 2019; Yarris 2017).

This research draws on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork with Vietnamese mothers and grandmothers in Hanoi (July 2016–July 2018; April 2019–August 2019). In listening to the voices of caregivers, I respond to a much-neglected issue in many discussions of precarious or affective labor: the structural entanglements of insecurity and care. Feminist writers (Federici 2008; Jill Casid 2012; Fantone 2007) have challenged the widely influential accounts of affective labor for their “willful misrecognition” and “deliberately false etymology” of the term “precarity” at the structural expense of care (Casid 2012, 122). Federici (2008) argues that in framing “affective labor” as essentially a new mechanism of work in the post-Fordist era, these accounts repeat the persistent pitfall of universalizing the Eurocentric masculinist view while ignoring the theoretical legacy of feminist works on the ethics of care (Tronto 1993) and emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Fantone (2007, 7) stresses that only at the moment “when the Western male worker began feeling the negative effects of the new post-industrial flexible job market” that the theorization of precarious labor claimed its central spotlight. The exclusion of care means that one of the most fundamental sites of capitalist exploitation and accumulation is overlooked (Dalla Costa & James, 1973; Federici, 2004). In failing to “think with care,” the recent theorization of precarious labor risks becoming the very symptom of what it aims to critique.

*This paradoxical condition of immobilized motion reveals the contradictions of the impasse whereby mothering life is crammed with endless stimulations, contradictory desires, and constant mobilities, while simultaneously feeling like it is heading nowhere.*

*This research draws on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork with Vietnamese mothers and grandmothers in Hanoi. In listening to the voices of caregivers, I respond to a much-neglected issue in many discussions of precarious or affective labor: the structural entanglements of insecurity and care.*

*Embracing the ethics of care, this CARGC Paper rejects the uncritical celebration of (Western) female autonomy to acknowledge our existential, cultural, and political condition of interdependency, and hence, relational vulnerability.*

Embracing the ethics of care (Tronto 1993), this CARGC Paper rejects the uncritical celebration of (Western) female autonomy to acknowledge our existential, cultural, and political condition of interdependency, and hence, relational vulnerability. The disruptions and continuities of care exploitation and resistance across generations in Vietnam allow me to unpack how neoliberal governmentality disorganizes young mothers' lives. But the insights offered by caregiving experiences of the older generation also enable me to look away from the obsession with autonomy to learn about agentic arrangement of care in places where the shared condition of vulnerability has long been taken as the starting point of an ethical life, instead of the cancellation of such.

## ON SPEED: TOO QUICK, TOO MUCH, TOO SLOW

Hoà's work and care practices are entangled with the accelerating pace of the digital mundane, the repetitive pressure of caring chores, the back-and-forth-ness between the two jobs, and the intensified sense of social insecurity, which altogether lead to a situation of hectic slowness. This prompts me to specify her mothering temporalities through the lens of speed, or the diverse and contesting ways of being "slow" and "quick" from the perspective of caregivers.

Speed is a productive analytical category when it comes to unpacking the world charged with the tangled orientations and intensities of mobility (Rosa 2013; Glezos 2013; Duclos, Criado & Nguyen 2017). Speed is never simply a matter of mathematical quantification: it is grounded in our worlding practices (Duclos 2017). The pressure, diversity, and fluidity of the substances that fill up our time give us a sense of fastness or slowness, which constitutes our body in its process of belonging as becoming, or the unfolding occupation of time and space. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 381, my emphasis): "Movement is extensive; speed is *intensive*."

The aspiration to speed up toward some "better future" is one of the most visible vectors of the modern telos (Rosa 2013), which has become more acute with the ever-quickening force of new media (Duclos 2017). However, the homogenous, linear, and accelerating force of capitalism's desire to colonize everything is illusory because the capacity to achieve a speed is unevenly produced and distributed. One group's mobility is structurally dependent on the immobility of other groups (Cresswell 2001). In moving away from the common association of modernity with speediness, a focus on slowness can shed light on how the incapacity to gain a speed serves as a crucial form of social, cultural, and political control.

Here it is important to identify different affective valances of being slow. Slowness is often depicted in terms of absence: of speed, activity, movement, or change. Such absence is not necessarily negative, as in, for example, the practice of resting, idling, or maintaining a "slow" lifestyle. Yet in these cases of "productive" slowness, life is still understood as progressing toward desirable outcomes, such as the reinvigoration of the body after a rest,

*In moving away from the common association of modernity with speediness, a focus on slowness can shed light on how the incapacity to gain a speed serves as a crucial form of social, cultural, and political control.*

*Being slow, in these cases,  
is a privilege.*

the wandering of creative ideas in idleness, or the depth of a “mindful” way of living. As with Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between “movement” and “speed,” these practices of productive slowness still generate a sense of existential mobility that “may be very slow, or even immobile, yet it is still speed” (1987, 381). Being slow, in these cases, is a privilege.

In a world centered on acceleration, however, slowness remains a frustrating indicator of disadvantages. Consider, for example, how chronic unemployment conditions the practice of “timepass” in India (Jeffrey 2010), “boredom” in Romania and Niger (O’Neill 2014; Masquelier 2013), or habitual “stuckness” in Zambia (Hansen 2005). In the Global North, the feeling of downwardness slowly encroaching on the once privileged life of white, middle-class subjects also generates the practice of “waiting out the crisis” when the new heroes seek to endure rather than fight against social calamities (Hage 2009). The motto of the time is resilience not revolution. The most important commonality of these various states of negative slowness is the disappearance of a credible future toward which life can progress.

The above studies, many of which are drawn from the experiences of young, single, or male subjects, generally associate slowness with the lack of meaningful activities to fill up one’s stretched present. The caregivers’ impasse, however, is hardly about an absence of mental and physical occupations. In my fieldwork, it is rare to see mothers biding their time in boredom. They are usually busy, quick on their feet and minds, and highly alert, while also complaining, sometimes loudly but most of the time in daily murmurs, about being “too slow” in making any meaningful progress in their career and in securing “a future” for their children. Here, being slow points less to an absence of activities than a state of accumulated pressure without a viable way out, or when slowness paradoxically results from the combination of “too much” and “too quick.”

In the following sections, I explore the caregiving experience of “hectic slowness” in the context of digitalized Vietnam. I first zoom into the mothering life of Hoa to reveal the temporal constitution of her caregiving subjectivity when she is entrapped between the abject threat of “slow death” (Berlant 2011, 95) caused by food toxins and the inevitable hope of “slow growth” embodied by her beloved son. I then step aside from the critique of the all-compassing neoliberal precarity to attend to the caring labor of a grandmother (Hoa’s mother), which is embedded in the history of Vietnamese women coping with war, poverty, and gender stigmatization. While silently offering her affective and manual labor in taking care of both her daughter and grandson, Hoa’s mother simultaneously stays “out-of-sync” with the accelerating pace of digital life as well as the collective stuckness that exhausts her daughter’s heart.

## BETWEEN “SLOW DEATH” AND “SLOW GROWTH”: ON THE DOUBLED SLOWNESS OF CARE

On her Facebook page, Hoa regularly updates her status advertising for *giò*, the delicious sausage she once treated me to for lunch. Here is an example of these status updates:

Today's *giò* is still warm. I put the heart of a mother [*trái tim người mẹ*] into it. Each batch of *giò* in my store is made exclusively from pork raised in the high mountains of Lào Cai without any growth stimulant. No borax, no MSG, no industrial fish sauce. My mother personally checks every step in the production process, so you can rest assured [*an tâm*—literally “a resting heart”] that my product suits the most sensitive people, including babies, pregnant women, the sick, and people with MSG allergy. My loyal and meticulous customers have long recognized that *giò* from my store tastes way better than the hardened or powdery products made from industrial pork sold on the flea markets. My baby boy, the cutest and most delicate food tester, always jumps on his feet every time he sees *giò* and usually finishes at least two big pieces in one go<sup>2</sup>.

Hoa's words, accompanied by a video of her little son delightfully biting a chunk of *giò*, sparks my imagination. Perhaps Hoa was typing these lines on her old Microsoft smartphone, or her new Samsung J7—both of which I have seen many times. These smartphones were not the fanciest models but were “good enough” to take photos of her products, capture cute videos of her son, update her Facebook around the clock, answer her customers on the go, and keep track of her busy days “running back and forth” between two jobs and a breastfed baby. This batch of *giò* was “still warm.” She must have written this post right after picking up her mother's package from the interprovincial bus station. “No borax, no MSG, no industrial fish sauce.” In a repetitive syntax of a succinct list, her sentence reverberates the panicked but banalized stories that haunt Vietnamese (mothering) life: borax added to *giò* to create meaty firmness in covering up the powdery texture of stale pork (Nguyễn 2016); fake Japanese MSG made from low quality and uncertified Chinese sources (Lan 2018); and the marketing-campaign-turned-nationalist-battle between “traditional” and “industrial” fish sauce long-simmering on Facebook and in kitchens alike (Bình Nguyễn 2016). Against the pervasive danger of “dirty food,” Hoa reassured her customers that they could put their hearts to rest, at least for one meal, because Hoa has already invested “the heart of a mother” into the making of her products.

While far from capturing all of Hoa's daily movements, this status alone reveals how fast life seems to hurtle toward her, and from many directions with tangled intensities: nutritional, financial, informational, technological, digital, and chemical. At this point, it is important to note that the overall intensified pace of life is felt by most Vietnamese people after the 1986 Reform, thanks to the unprecedented market growth celebrated as an “economic miracle”

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine.

(Vanham 2018). This miraculous sense of speediness, however, includes in itself the acceleration of inescapability. Consider, for example, the massive replacement of ambling bicycles with agile motorbikes (Truitt 2008), which is accompanied by equally massive traffic jams. The real estate fever that grants rocketing mobility to some leaves many others waiting indefinitely in the rubbles of development (Harms 2013). Rapid and endless layers of urban construction create a fancier look to the cities, at the same time, adding more confusion and resistance to urban changes (Schwenkel 2013). When the darker side of rapid marketization is combined with the darker side of communist politics, the future is increasingly tainted by the precarious sensibilities of uncertainty, disappointment, mistrust, inertia, and stuckness.

The idea of food being “dirty” is thus idiosyncratic to the post-Reform times. This social reality could only become imaginable and tangible when a decent proportion of the population had an adequate quantity of food to start worrying about quality instead. Almost everyone who survived the 1970s and 1980s remembers food through images of delayed delivery, endless queuing, and habitual shortages. Back then, this chronic physical slowness and inadequacy made food the ultimate object of hope, almost never associated with filthy danger. The awareness of food toxins is also conditioned by a new phenomenon of the post-Reform era: the overwhelmingly fast and thick flows of information, particularly sensational ones, thanks to the rapid development of television and the Internet (Nguyen-Thu 2019; Hoang 2020; Phuong 2017; Nguyen 2020). To put it in the words of Douglas (2002, 128), “food is not likely to be polluting at all unless the external boundaries of the social system are under pressure.” What Hoa terms the “everywhere-ness” of “dirty food” thus reveals a kind of social stuckness when too many things—foods, chemicals, information, and choices—come too quickly without quick-enough digestibility. Daily meals have now become the perpetual battleground where the much-celebrated expansion of the “free market” manifests its new condition of despair in the shift from “slow delivery” to “slow death.”

Hoa thus shares the same condition of accelerating inertia felt by many Vietnamese people after the Reform, but her experience allows us to see how the caregiving role adds even more stuckness to the already heavy pace of a hectic life. In the above Facebook post, Hoa is establishing an affective ground of solidarity with her imagined customers by describing a kind of embodied insecurity felt exclusively by caregivers—the sitters of the sick and small babies, including pregnant women. The horror of chemicals silently rotting inside the stomach of the most vulnerable subjects, who require and deserve special care, manifests a kind of slow, banal, invisible, and catalytic violence generally excluded from the scene of spectacular ruination. Different from other forms of precarity that remain more or less outside of the inner organs (such as the loss of job, or the lack of housing or money), dietary pollution generates an irremovable embodiment of death through chemical absorption that turns outer toxins into inner flesh and bone—“a condition that can never be cured, only managed” (Berlant 2011, 103). To put it in the much-quoted words of a Vietnamese congressman that immediately went viral online: “The route to the cemetery from the

*When the darker side of rapid marketization is combined with the darker side of communist politics, the future is increasingly tainted by the precarious sensibilities of uncertainty, disappointment, mistrust, inertia, and stuckness.*

stomach of each of us is shorter and easier than ever!” (Huong 2015). This condition reveals the abject quality of caring precarity, understood in Kristeva’s (1982) terms as entrapment between the object and the subject, the inside and the outside, the conscious and the unconscious, cultural meanings, and biochemical transformations. In the form of “slow death,” food toxins penetrate and unsettle the caregiving life at the capillary level of the peptics and the tenuous space of everydayness, thus extending the depth and width of precarization.

*The focus on care allows us to see the uneven distribution of slowness along the gender line.*

The focus on care allows us to see the uneven distribution of slowness along the gender line. In his discussion of “suspended” temporality at a site of urban eviction in Saigon, Harms (2013) explains how slowness becomes a form of state control when the endless waiting for one’s house to be evicted forecloses the future. One potential way to resist the state’s slow oppression is to turn waiting into playing. An illuminating example is Mr. Tur, a subject of chronic unemployment living in an eviction site who claims his agency by transforming the forced suspension of time into an opportunity to hang out with his friends and convert social connections into money and influence. Harms (2013, 359), however, acknowledges that Mr. Tur’s waiting-as-playing is “filled with ribald discussion of sexuality,” at the same time, “depended entirely on the labor of female members of his household, especially his wife and his daughter-in-law, who together prepared and served the food and drink.” Productive and playful timepass for this man, or his productive slowness, only becomes possible at the cost of the doubled stuckness for his female family members, who continue to find themselves ever-more entrenched in the messiness of waiting and serving. In the Vietnamese fields of ruination, staying “care-free” continues to be a male privilege.

It is thus no surprise that Hoa and many other young mothers only enter the gig economy of online food trading after the birth of their children. Consider, for instance, the Facebook group *Chợ Quê* (Countryside Market) that specializes in food trading with more than 500,000 members, the majority of whom being mothers of small children. Hundreds of posts describe the seller as “a mother of milk and diaper” [*bà mẹ bím sữa*], joining the group to “earn some extra pennies to feed my baby” or “to share the cost and the opportunity of eating clean produce.” Hoa, who is an active member of this group, only decided to open her Facebook store when she learned of her pregnancy. Before that, Hoa was also “carefree.” “Back then, I didn’t think much about toxins. I ate out all the time.” Ahmed (2010, 186) describes the same situation of precarizing transformation when one “converts from indifference—the apparent glibness of the ‘whatever’—to caring, which means caring for someone, having someone to care for, and thus caring for what happens, caring about whether there is a future or not.” The commitment to care transforms the capacity to say “whatever” into a fond memory of a non-maternal past.

*The vulnerable situation of caregivers can be defined as a specific failure to resist both the urgency to remain hopeful and the intensified exposure to the politics of hopelessness.*

Hoa thus embodies a kind of gendered stuckness typical of the time of apocalyptic sensibility: the entrapment between the unescapable despair of “slow death” and the unescapable hope of “slow growth.” In other words, the vulnerable situation of caregivers

can be defined as a specific failure to resist both the urgency to remain hopeful and the intensified exposure to the politics of hopelessness. Such labor of *having to hope* is exhausting at a time when all the possibilities for hopefulness keep draining out. In the caring impasse, when “the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace” (Berlant 2011, 4–5), the commitment to care turns the caregivers into the most acutely exposed subjects of neoliberal vulnerability.

### UPDATING THE CARING SELF: A MOTHER'S HEART AT WORK

Faced with intensified stuckness, mothers feel pressure to seek a way out—financially, emotionally, and existentially. Many young Vietnamese mothers turn to the gig economy enabled by Facebook because this social network provides them an exit to release the pressure of being a caregiver, allowing them to gain a faster life. In their digital transactions, “speed is a product of connectivity” (Nguyen 2017, 28).

Hoa is drawn to Facebook, which has attracted more than 60 million active users in Vietnam with significant social and political impact (Nguyen-Thu 2018). In order to run a Facebook store, Hoa does not have to rent a physical stall, maintain fixed working hours, or be physically present, as is the norm in “traditional” Vietnamese female trading businesses. Online food trading accommodates messy mothering timetables organized around the child's activities, allowing a mother like Hoa to maintain a fulltime job while earning extra money and securing a stable supply of “clean food” for her child.

Digital trading does not directly “solve” the problem of chemical intoxication, but it *translates* the incurable and shapeless abjection of “dirty food” into something that appears “manageable,” hence easing the inertia of the doubled stuckness between “slow death” and “slow growth.” This “rough” translating process is mediated by capitalized transactions (Chakrabarty 2000, 17, 72-96), which bridge the “problem” of bodily stuckness with the “solution” of online trading without necessary commensuration between the two translated objects. But this seemingly “manageable” project introduces its own demands of what Wilson and Yochim (2017, 84) term “the fourth shift.” This new layer of flexible labor adds on, cuts across, and fills up any remaining minutes after mothers have completed the “first shift” of office work, the “second shift” of housework, and the “third shift” of loving work (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Hochschild 1997).

Regarding digital speed, Duclos (2017, 24) argues that studies of media acceleration should deviate from the uncritical celebration of automatic commensurability and seamless connectivity. Instead, critical inquiries of digital speed should bring “the background and the outside” into their analytical frame to “render visible the human and energetic cost required to endure life at digital speed” (Duclos 2017, 25). In the case of Hoa, going digital never removes the deep-seated social norms associated with small businesswomen. Small-

*Digital trading does not directly “solve” the problem of chemical intoxication, but it translates the incurable and shapeless abjection of “dirty food” into something that appears “manageable,” hence easing the inertia of the doubled stuckness between “slow death” and “slow growth.”*

scale business in Vietnam is seen as an almost exclusively women's job (Leshkovich 2014), requiring essentialized feminine traits such as resourcefulness, prudence, and communicative cleverness. Female petty traders are at the same time heavily discredited as being sharp-tongued, uneducated, deceitful, and greedy (Leshkovich 2014). In this context of gendered stigmatization, it is of little surprise that Hoa solely manages her online business without ever involving her husband, who is also working fulltime and whom Hoa often describes as "very sympathetic in supporting my Facebook store." This extra job gives Hoa more speed in managing her life, but it also provokes a subtle sense of shame in her internalization of negative stereotypes. The mobility afforded by Facebook is thus always grounded in the extended cultural landscape, which weighs down Hoa's digital speed with the cultural volume of stigmatized womanhood.

*The mobility afforded by Facebook is thus always grounded in the extended cultural landscape, which weighs down Hoa's digital speed with the cultural volume of stigmatized womanhood.*

In a similar vein, running a Facebook store does not make Hoa's labor "immaterial." Mothers' digital work is dependent on the rendering invisible of a load of physical toil, which includes creating and maintaining the supply chain, quality control, transporting, cold-storing, packaging, consulting, shipping, etc. Mothers' digital work also sits on top of the same, if not ever-expanding material and physical requirements of traditional and not-so-traditional parenting: nursing, changing diapers, preparing and serving meals, picking up children from school, going to the hospital, playing at the park, organizing a birthday party, responding to the baby's "cues," being "friends" to one's kids, etc. Hoa's business is thoroughly entangled with the invisible labor of less privileged women, including her mother, and a wide range of workers, most of whom are women, in the logistic process. Beyond the human cost, Hoa's digital business is also dependent on a huge and energy-intensive infrastructure of cables, factory, mining, and electricity plants that all contribute to the overall "slow death" of the planet (Nixon 2012). There is thus no such thing as a "pure" digital speed that links weightless dots together to form a "virtual" network. Instead, digital connectivity is based on material and bodily relations of extraction and labor, across which gender remains the main axis.

*...digital connectivity is based on material and bodily relations of extraction and labor, across which gender remains the main axis.*

Still, going digital does make a difference. Digital platforms play a vital role in (dis)organizing Hoa's life, enabling a new sense of speediness, and giving her a possibility for hope. The question is: what exactly is *at work* when mothers go online?

Hoa and many other mothers commonly talk about "having a heart" [*có tâm*] in conducting their business, particularly when trying to prove the quality of their services and products. As Hoa tells us in the above advertising post for *giò*, she has put "the heart of a mother" into her product, which is precisely why her customers can place their heart "at rest" [*an tâm*]. In online environments, it is *the heart* of the mother that is working an extra shift, on top of her long-existing non-digitalized maternal load.



In order to understand the heart's digital mode, it is productive to learn from indigenous insights—a method inspired by Nyamnjoh's (2019) study of digital politics in Africa. In East Asian cultures, the “heart” (*tâm/tim* in Vietnamese, *xin* in Chinese, *shin* in Japanese, *sim* in Korean) carries a philosophical and cultural weight that is incommensurable to its Western equivalent. *Tâm* is commonly translated into English as “heart/mind” instead of “heart” alone (Cheng 2013; Ames 2015). This oddly crafted translation reveals the loaded semantic baggage carried by this concept. As Ames suggests (2015), in the Chinese context, *tâm* might be better understood as “bodyheartminding”—a kind of visceral soul. Far from an organ responsible for the specific emotion of love, *tâm* is an assemblage of all feelings, thoughts, perceptions, attachments, movements, and transformations that constitute the total vector of a human's existence. Inspired by Elvin (1989, 213), *tâm* is “the field of force,” which pulls together all the dimensions of viscerality, intellectuality, emotionality, and morality into one relatively coherent self. *Tâm* is, in short, the faculty of “affect” *par excellence*.

Two essential qualities of *tâm* inform our understanding of the digital heart. First, *tâm* is the center of the inner self. Second, and more importantly, *tâm*'s utmost innerness is always radically exposed; thus it can be unsettled by even the slightest disturbance. The sensitivity of *tâm* is well reflected in the Vietnamese language. For instance, to be troubled by or preoccupied with something is to have a “busy heart” [*bận tâm*]; to be emotionally touched by something is to have a “moved heart” [*động tâm*]; an effort to calm oneself down against the intrusive force of an outer turmoil is to “quieten the heart” [*tĩnh tâm*]. Being able to maintain the harmonic condition of *tâm* amidst chaotic encounters with the outside world—the state of “mindfulness” in Zen tradition—is thus the hardest work of ethical self-training.

If *tâm* means the constant (re)construction of the inner self, then putting *tâm* to work is to submit this process to the regulation of capitalist governance. Let us return to Hoa's status for *giò* quoted above. Her wittily crafted words tell us that she has learned well to perform the marketing lesson that Banet-Weiser (2012) terms “branding the authentic,” whereby the traffic and profit of an individually-owned online business correlate with the capacity of marketing the self. The logic of translation is simple: a person that appears to have an authentically sincere heart is more likely to sell authentically good food. Hoa's repetitive references to “industrial pork,” “industrial fish sauce,” “growth stimulants,” “MSG,” or “borax” all point to a pervasive sense of fakeness in other products, thus enhancing the authenticating effect of her mothering self. The video of her cute little boy happily eating a chunk of *giò* visually confirms her business ethics which she told me about during our first lunch together: “I eat the same produce that I sell online.” Without any solid anchor that gives Hoa's “Facebook store” a sense of physical presence, Hoa has nothing but her digital self, a mediated expression of her *tâm*, to prove her trustworthiness. For the mothers who are engaging on Facebook to buy and sell “clean food,” to be able to perform trust on the ground of heartfelt authenticity is precisely the “way out.”

*If tâm means the constant (re)construction of the inner self, then putting tâm to work is to submit this process to the regulation of capitalist governance.*

*To perform the mothering heart, an already too sensitive organ, in the digital environment means to wear one's heart upon one's sleeve. At digital speed, the mothering heart runs electrified, and it also runs weary.*

*A flexible flow of money and a little gain of intimate recognition come with a life torn between too many things: this ringing phone, that package, the bus station, this Facebook post, that pleasant moment spent eating, those customers, these rude comments, a small amount of money, those panic-inducing headlines, pesticide, a sudden panic attack, a few minutes of rest, two big pieces of giò, a happy boy, a moment of bitterness, a very late night, a sympathetic husband, that lingering cough, a playground, the in-laws, kindergarten, grandmother, love, words, flavor, exhaustion.*

The “authentic” heart, however, cannot by itself turn the performance of digital authenticity into a readily workable “exit” from the caring impasse. If *tâm* is radically sensitive to the outer world, then putting *tâm* to work in the Facebook marketplace means to force it into a constant combating mode against the assailing foreignness of digital speed. To put it in the words of Duclos, “digital speed engenders an exposed self, radically open to and opened by the world” (2017, 24). McLuhan also argues that in being “extended” by the accelerating force of electronic media, “the shell went inside, the organs outside... But when an organ goes out (ablation), it goes numb” (1970, 42). To perform the mothering heart, an already too sensitive organ, in the digital environment means to wear one’s heart upon one’s sleeve. At digital speed, the mothering heart runs electrified, and it also runs weary.

The exhaustion of digital speed manifests in the form of a never-ending race. On many Facebook groups dedicated to food trading, mothers usually express their fear of being rendered invisible by Facebook algorithms, something Chun (2016, ix) terms the “wonderful creepiness” of big data. *Tâm* is on the “inside” and it takes nonstop work to make it visible to others in the online marketplace. It is common to see mothers’ posts such as this one: “Dear moms [*các mẹ ơi*], Facebook acts weirdly today, right? I feel like no one sees my post.” Tips to increase “interactivity,” “visibility,” and “attention” are widely shared, updated, and sold. In coping with the estranging force of digital creepiness, a mother needs to “ceaselessly shake off excessive energy and implications” (Duclos 2017, 22) to continually pull herself together amidst never-ending and unexpected updates, comments, likes, inboxing, complaints, and competition. The intrinsic tension of digital speed becomes clear: one must be stable enough to create a sustained sense of self-authenticity, at the same time, be quick enough to compete and remain relevant in a monstrously quickening world.

Hoa told me about how tiring it is to run a Facebook store: “My phone is ‘ting ting’ all the time.” Her phantom ringing syndrome is rooted in the fact that as long as Hoa is online, she is in active work mode. “I check [my] inbox and arrange delivery all day long, but mostly at noon while I am having lunch at my office. For longer conversations, like consulting my customers or responding to their feedback, I try to do at night after my son is put to bed.” Being able to work anytime and anywhere means to work all the time and everywhere. A flexible flow of money and a little gain of intimate recognition come with a life torn between too many things: this ringing phone, that package, the bus station, this Facebook post, that pleasant moment spent eating, those customers, these rude comments, a small amount of money, those panic-inducing headlines, pesticide, a sudden panic attack, a few minutes of rest, two big pieces of giò, a happy boy, a moment of bitterness, a very late night, a sympathetic husband, that lingering cough, a playground, the in-laws, kindergarten, grandmother, love, words, flavor, exhaustion. “Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things.” (Stewart 2007, 9). In a world charged with contradictory hope and fear when things are either too rapid or too

inert, to mother is to carry the weight of multiplied slowness while trying to move forward at the speed of a scrolling screen. In their hectic slowness, mothers are trying to catch a breath: one step forward, two steps back.

## “OUT OF SYNC”: THE GRANDMOTHER’S WISDOM

“Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns” (Tsing 2015, 21). In her critique of the future as a singular vector that moves toward what turns out to be “the end of the world,” Tsing (2015, viii) argues that the linear obsession with both progression and apocalypse blinds us from our capacity to realize the emerging possibility of life in capitalist ruins. We need to cultivate “the art of noticing” (Tsing 2015, 17), which means “to look around rather than ahead” (22), or to “step aside” (143) the immanence of capitalist expansion to pay careful attention to the non-scalable things that continue to grow and die in their own temporalities. In the final part of this paper, I follow Tsing’s suggestion to “step aside” from the critique of the all-encompassing global political economy of speed to “look around” for rhythms and velocities incommensurable to the translating projects of capitalism. What I notice is the grandmothing labor of Hoa’s mother, Mrs. Liên. While the contribution of elderly women like Mrs. Liên to the sustenance of Vietnamese life is undeniable and indispensable, many continue to stay “out of sync” without totally rejecting the telos of modern acceleration and deceleration.

*In the final part of this paper, I follow Tsing’s suggestion to “step aside” from the critique of the all-encompassing global political economy of speed to “look around” for rhythms and velocities incommensurable to the translating projects of capitalism.*

“I am *lucky* to have my mom’s help,” Hoa told me when I asked her about her mother, whose silent presence is found everywhere in Hoa’s Facebook posts, in our conversations, and in my field notes. This statement can be read as an expression of gratitude, but it sounds more like a relief. The support offered by the grandmother significantly releases the pressure of Hoa’s caring impasse—physically, financially, emotionally, and existentially. Hoa’s mother sometimes travels four hundred kilometers to the capital city to look after her baby when he is sick for extended periods so that Hoa can go to work. When Hoa’s mother stays at home in the province of Lào Cai, she spends a good part of her day sourcing “naturally” raised pigs and chickens, as well as “pesticide-free” rice and vegetables from her neighbors’ backyards and in the countryside market, then packing and sending the produce to Hanoi for Hoa to feed her family and sell. What Duclos (2017, 25) terms “the human and energetic cost required to endure life at digital speed” thus definitely includes the non-retiring and non-paid labor of grandmothers.

By most standards, Mrs. Liên should be the icon of the “left-behind woman.” In Hanoi, she would easily be described as “backward” (*lạc hậu*), which can be translated into “too slow.” Being an old woman with little formal education, Mrs. Liên has spent a major part of her life in the mountainous province of Lào Cao trading rice and homemade liquor. The more I get to know Mrs. Liên, however, the more it becomes clear that she is always in the “here

and now” instead of getting stuck in postcolonial waitness. She is, in fact, comfortably in tune with technologies. She has two smartphones to alternate between the discounts offered by two different pre-paid services. She shot many of the videos and photographs that Hoa shares on Facebook to show off the quality of “clean” produce. Mrs. Liên uses popular apps such as Zalo, Facebook, or Messenger to connect with her trading networks and children. She is much more informed than many educated persons about how to detect good quality food. In her own daughter’s description, she is “quicker than anyone else in the family at calculating money” and “more flexible in dealing with unexpected situations than most of the young people in Hanoi.”

On the other hand, Mrs. Liên is not excited about scaling up the “clean food” business. Her trading network remains strictly local. Her explanation is simple: “Mass and easy production is never ‘clean.’” It takes time to raise a chicken or a pig whose meat is tasty and nutritious. Mrs. Liên also stubbornly lags behind the most “up-to-date” childcare practices, with which Hoa is obsessed. Hoa and her mother quarrel endlessly about topics like the emotional and medical benefits of exclusive and prolonged breastfeeding, as well as the new “modern” and “Western” parenting styles. But Mrs. Liên’s capacity to maintain her own tempo has allowed her to survive the layers of destructions that have defined Vietnamese life during her lifetime: war, hunger, authoritarian communism, and neoliberal capitalism.

I met Mrs. Liên on my second visit to Hoa’s place when she came to look after her grandson while he suffered from a respiratory infection. In a mixture of dignity and modesty, Mrs. Liên told me how she raised her three children—one of whom suffered from chronic illness since birth—mainly on her own, because her husband worked in the army and thus hardly stayed at home. Her judgments about Vietnamese quality of life were often contradictory. At one point, she emphasized how “life today is much easier than before.” At another point, she admitted that “life back then was *simpler*” when children could look after themselves at a very young age and “food was not as ‘dirty’ as today.” Indeed, life has changed vastly since her mothering days in the 1980s and 1990s, to the point that no single judgment can do justice to the rapidity and diversity of post-Reform transformations.

The more I listened to her life story, however, the more it became clear that life has never been “simple” for a mother of three children, now or then. The simplicity of life in Mrs. Liên’s narrative is more an attitude than a fact. When I asked her if she ever felt stuck, Mrs. Liên shared a moment of despair when she was stretching herself too much to feed the three small children at a time when food was too scarce: “I weighed barely 40 kg. I could not get many things done when the kids were awake, so I worked mostly at night, alone in the field or in the kitchen distilling rice liquor. I remember asking myself: ‘What if I just die?’ [*Hay là mình chết đi?*].” In a world that seems to move forward too quickly in all matters, but remains bluntly inert in changing the gendered exploitation of care, regardless of whether it is due to socialist ideology or neoliberal precarity, who will need to die first? The mother or the child?

*In a world that seems to move forward too quickly in all matters, but remains bluntly inert in changing the gendered exploitation of care, regardless of whether it is due to socialist ideology or neoliberal precarity, who will need to die first? The mother or the child?*

Precarity is a “recent” problem only to those who have largely taken for granted their previous sense of stability at the cost of many others. For generations of Vietnamese mothers, there is no such thing as structural security. Hoa’s condition of caring impasse, which is defined by the accelerating force of marketization and globalization, surely differs from her mother’s precarity centered on the brutal delay of peace, food, and healthcare. But Hoa’s capacity to cope with systemic and existential vulnerability and her commitment to care is directly inherited from her mother’s. Hoa told me that for a good part of her youth, she had blamed her mother for being too “outdated” [*lỗi thời*] for failing to escape the trap of “traditional” womanhood. “Only when I had my son did I see why my mom was willing to endure. *I don’t know if it is bad or good*, but I understand her now.” In a moment of realization, recognition, and solidarity, Hoa came to appreciate her mother’s underestimated wisdom about the irreducible value of care, which no wizardry, in capitalism or socialism alike, can replace.

“I don’t know if it is bad or good.” Hoa was too polite to tell me that she cannot afford to mind if people judge her in the same way she once judged her mother: as an uncritical servant to husband and children, a blind follower of Confucian female virtue, and a passive victim of socialist ideology or capitalist greed. Each of the above accusations has merit, but they also reduce the value of care to zero, as if infants could grow up on their own, or the ill could just look after themselves and life could automatically take care of itself when all the men are too “busy” to care. The question is never whether the commitment to care is “bad or good,” but how care is acknowledged, redistributed, compensated for, and on whose terms. The more complex question for women like Hoa and her mother has been how to fight for gender equality without destroying whom we care for.

*The question is never whether the commitment to care is “bad or good,” but how care is acknowledged, redistributed, compensated for, and on whose terms.*

## CONCLUSION

In this CARGC Paper, I explore the constitution of temporally differentiated selves by Vietnamese mothers who live in a world designed to punish rather than accommodate the caregivers’ tangled paces of life. My attention to caregiving labor is not merely an issue of additional recognition: it is a matter of conceptual emphasis and political urgency. When “we move care from its current peripheral location to a place near the center of human life” (Tronto 1993, 101), we can critically reflect on our never fully “autonomous” lives and our ineradicable involvement with others. In “thinking with care,” we can imagine a possibility of a speed that renders enough time for life to sustainably reproduce itself.

Hoa’s physical exhaustion and mental restlessness demonstrate how the commitment to care is turned into a governing force that underwrites the precarization of female labor in the digital age. But in its new temporal organization, Hoa’s neoliberal vulnerability is just the surfacing layer of the structural insecurity that has long defined Vietnamese caregiving lives. Entangled with young mothers’ condition of “hectic slowness” is the invisible works

*In this CARGC Paper, I explore the constitution of temporally differentiated selves by Vietnamese mothers who live in a world designed to punish rather than accommodate the caregivers’ tangled paces of life.*

*But once we move beyond the tendency to search only for the kind of feminist agency that we want to see, we might be able to notice the insights offered by many non-West women who continue to perform their own kind of agency of care, actively and ethically, in ways that do not map onto the Western binary of oppression and resistance.*

of the grandmothers. In being “out-of-sync” with the demands of an ever-quickening life, the grandmothering labor reveals how women in the Global South always already endure an uncomfortable, if not highly disturbing, relationship to the telos of modern progress. Anything they do that deviates from the illusion of “an autonomous will” provokes a whole host of negative associations such as “the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, cultural backwardness, and the rest” (Mahmood 2009, 14). But once we move beyond the tendency to search only for the kind of feminist agency that we want to see, we might be able to notice the insights offered by many non-West women who continue to perform their own kind of agency of care, actively and ethically, in ways that do not map onto the Western binary of oppression and resistance. Here the idea is never to romanticize women’s endurance—something Mrs. Liên herself would strongly resist. But only when we learn from the caregivers’ important insights and insecurities that we can understand what enables and disables their capacity to gain a meaningful momentum in life.

Mrs. Liên’s simplicity, modesty, and stubbornness when she narrates her caregiving life are commonly-encountered dispositions when listening to grandmothers during my fieldwork. Their advanced age gives them license to calm down and get wiser, but their ethic of care cannot be automatically explained as an effect of aging. It is grounded in their history of surviving and resisting multiple forms of oppression in the role of caregivers. Such ethic of care reminds me of Haraway’s idea about living with a check: “finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness” (1988, 579). Mrs. Liên’s insistence on knowing the limit of life and her commitment to exposing herself to the tangled vulnerability of care manifest the kind of obstinate indifference to both the requirement to update oneself and the accusation of being outdated. Her expression of indifference recalls the way some men playfully resist the state’s slow violence (see Mr. Tur, discussed above). But the crucial distinction is that Mrs. Liên’s agentive indifference takes on the shared burden of collective vulnerability instead of outsourcing it to others.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ames, Roger T. 2015. "‘Bodyheartminding’ (*Xin* 心): Reconceiving the Inner Self and the Outer World in the Language of Holographic Focus and Field." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 10 (2): 167-180.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2012. *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Binh, Nguyễn. 2016. "Cuộc Khẩu Chiến Giữa Nước Mắm Truyền Thống và Công Nghiệp" [The Debates Between Traditional and Industrial Fish Sauce]. *Zing*, October 11. <https://news.zing.vn/cuoc-khau-chien-giua-nuoc-mam-truyen-thong-va-cong-nghiep-post688646.html>.
- Can, Başak. 2019. "Caring for Solidarity? The Intimate Politics of Grandmother Childcare and Neoliberal Conservatism in Urban Turkey." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 60 (1): 85-107.
- Casid, Jill. 2012. "Handle with Care." *TDR/The Drama Review* 56 (4): 121-135.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cheng, Chung-Ying. 2013. "A Generative Ontological Unity of Heart-Mind and Nature in the Four Books." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40 (2): 234-251.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2016. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2001. "The Production of Mobilities." *New Formations* 43: 11-25.
- Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, and Selma James. 1973. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 2002. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Duclos, Vincent, Tomás Sánchez Criado, and Vinh-Kim Nguyen. 2017. "Speed: An Introduction." *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (1): 1-11.

- Duclos, Vincent. 2017. "Inhabiting Media: An Anthropology of Life in Digital Speed." *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (1): 21-27.
- Ehlert, Judith and Nora Katharina Falzmann. 2019. *Food Anxiety in Globalising Vietnam*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan
- Elvin, Mark. 1989. "Tales of *Shen* and *Xin*: Body-Person and Heart-Mind in China during the Last 150 Years." In *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two*, edited by Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, 267-349. New York: Zone Book.
- Fantone, Laura. 2007. "Precarious Changes: Gender and Generational Politics in Contemporary Italy." *Feminist Review* 87 (1): 5-20.
- Federici, Silvia. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Federici, Silvia. 2008. "Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint." *In the Middle of the Whirlwind*. Accessed February 9, 2020. <https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/>.
- Glezos, Simon. 2011. "The Ticking Bomb: Speed, Liberalism and Resentment against the Future." *Contemporary Political Theory* 10 (2): 147-165.
- Hage, Ghassan. 2009. "Waiting out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality." In *Waiting*, edited by Ghassan Hage, 97-107. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575-599.
- Harms, Erik. 2013. "Eviction Time in the New Saigon: Temporalities of Displacement in the Rubble of Development." *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (2): 344-368.
- Hà, Thanh. 2018. "Mô Hình Bán Hàng Online Thách Thức Ông Lớn Thương Mại Điện Tử" [Online Trading Challenge Big E-Commerce Players]. VnExpress, April 3, <https://vnexpress.net/mo-hinh-ban-hang-online-thach-thuc-ong-lon-thuong-mai-dien-tu-3730473.html>.
- Hansen, Karen Tranberg. 2005. "Getting Stuck in the Compound: Some Odds against Social Adulthood in Lusaka, Zambia." *Africa Today* 51 (4): 3-16.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1997. *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.



- Hochschild, Arlie, and Anne Machung. 2012. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Hoang, Ha. 2020. "K-Pop Male Androgyny, Mediated Intimacy, and Vietnamese Fandom." In *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia* edited by Jason Vincent A. Cabañes and Cecilia S. Uy-Tioco, 187-203. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Huong, Thu. 2015. "Đại Biểu Trần Ngọc Vinh: Con Đường Từ Dạ Dày Đến Nghĩa Địa Chưa Bao Giờ Ngắn Thế" [Assemblyman Trần Ngọc Vinh: The Route to the Cemetery from the Stomach of Each of Us is Shorter than Ever!]" *VnExpress*, October 17. <https://vnexpress.net/dai-bieu-tran-ngoc-vinh-con-duong-tu-da-day-den-nghia-dia-chua-bao-gio-ngan-the-3313306.html>.
- Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. "Approaching Abjection." *Oxford Literary Review* 5 (1/2): 125–149.
- Lan, Anh. 2018. "Mua Vỏ Bao Nhân Hiệu Ajinomoto Giả, Đóng Gói Mì Chính Màng Di Tiêu Thu" [Fake MSG in Ajinomoto Packaging]. *Công An Nhân Dân Online*, January 22. <http://cand.com.vn/Ban-tin-113/Vo-Ajinomoto-nhung-trong-la-mi-chinh-Trung-Quoc-475705/>.
- Leshkovich, Ann Marie. 2014. *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2009. "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject." In *Pieties and Gender*, edited by Lene Sjørup and Hilda Rømer Christensen, 11–45. Leiden: Brill.
- Masquelier, Adeline. 2013. "Teatime: Boredom and the Temporalities of Young Men in Niger." *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 83: 385–402.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1970. *Counterblast*. London: Rapp and Whiting.
- Nguyen, Dang. 2020. "The Network Life of Non-biomedical Knowledge: Mapping Vietnamese Traditional Medicine Discourses on Facebook." Paper presented at the Understanding Digital Vietnam: Contemporary Issues and New Directions Workshop, Yale University, New Haven, May 2020.
- Nguyen, Vinh-Kim. 2017. "Viral Speed: Infrastructure, Connectivity, Ontogeny; or, Notes on the Molecular Epidemiology of Epidemics." *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (1): 28–34.
- Nguyen-Thu, Giang. 2018. "Vietnamese Media Going Social: Connectivism, Collectivism, and Conservatism." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77 (4): 895–908.

- Nguyen-Thu, Giang. 2019. *Television in Post-Reform Vietnam: Nation, Media, Market*. London: Routledge.
- Nguyễn, Nam. 2016. “Khiếp Đâm Các Cơ Sở Cho Chất Cấm Thảm Đều Chả Lựa” [Giò Filled with Banned Substances by Terrifying Food Producers]. *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, April 22. <https://tuoitre.vn/khiiep-dam-cac-co-so-cho-chat-cam-tham-deu-cha-lua-1088845.htm>.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2019. “ICTs as *Juju*: African Inspiration for Understanding the Compositeness of Being Human through Digital Technologies.” *Journal of African Media Studies* 11 (3): 279–291.
- O’Neill, Bruce. 2014. “Cast Aside: Boredom, Downward Mobility, and Homelessness in Post-communist Bucharest.” *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (1): 8–31.
- Phuong, Tri. 2017. “Saint, Celebrity, and the Self(ie): Body Politics in Late Socialist Vietnam.” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 25 (4): 821–842.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2013. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schwenkel, Christina. 2013. “Post/socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam.” *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (2): 252–277.
- Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tronto, Joan C. 1993. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York: Routledge.
- Truitt, Allison. 2008. “On the Back of a Motorbike: Middle-class Mobility in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.” *American Ethnologist* 35 (1): 3–19.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Vanham, Peter. 2018. “The Story of Viet Nam’s Economic Miracle.” *World Economic Forum*, September 11, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/how-vietnam-became-an-economic-miracle/>.
- Wilson, Julie A., and Emily Chivers Yochim. 2017. *Mothering Through Precarity: Women’s Work and Digital Media*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Yarris, Kristin E. 2017. *Care Across Generations: Solidarity and Sacrifice in Transnational Families*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.



## MISSION STATEMENT

The Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania is an institute for advanced study that produces and promotes advanced research on global communication and public life, bringing the very best scholarship to bear on enduring global questions and pressing contemporary issues. As an institute for advanced study, CARGC aims to produce world class, field-defining research, grounded in a vision of “inclusive globalization” that embraces the stunning diversity of global media, politics and culture. This vision is grounded in an unyielding commitment to academic excellence and global engagement. Our core value is the articulation of deep, expert knowledge of key world regions and their histories and languages, to theoretically sophisticated and methodologically rigorous research. We aim to stimulate critical conversations between “area” studies, interdisciplinary fields, and disciplines about entrenched and emerging structures, flows, struggles and outcomes in worldwide communication. We also explore changing dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination, including electronic publication, digital archives, and new ways of understanding and explaining the world, chiefly through CARGC Press. With a commitment to the development of early career scholars, CARGC hosts postdoctoral and visiting fellows who work in research groups, and organizes lectures, symposia and summer institutes.

 [cargc.asc.upenn.edu](http://cargc.asc.upenn.edu)

 [www.facebook.com/AnnenbergCARGC](https://www.facebook.com/AnnenbergCARGC)

 [@AnnenbergCARGC](https://twitter.com/AnnenbergCARGC)



# VIRTUAL FALL EVENTS

#CARGC2021

@AnnenbergCARGC

f AnnenbergCARGC

cargc@asc.upenn.edu

CARGC BOOK TALK

**Arlene Dávila in Conversation with Elizabeth Ferrer**  
*Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics*

**Thursday, September 17**

**12:00 – 1:00**

CARGC COLLOQUIUM

**Seyram Avle**

**"China, Africa, and the Shifting Worlds of Tech Labor"**

**Thursday, October 29**

**12:00 – 1:00**

CARGC COLLOQUIUM

**Maria Repnikova**

**"The Fragmented Spectacle of Chinese Soft Power  
in Africa"**

**Thursday, November 12**

**12:00 – 1:00**

CARGC COLLOQUIUM

**Hana Masri**

**"The Rhetoric of Waste and the Politics of Human  
Disposability from the Americas to the Arab World"**

**Thursday, December 3**

**12:00 – 1:00**

CARGC BOOK TALK

**Wazmah Osman**

***Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to  
You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Local Activists***

**Thursday, December 10**

**12:00 – 1:00**

**For more info, please visit [cargc.asc.upenn.edu/events](https://cargc.asc.upenn.edu/events)**