Self-Entrepreneurism and Self-Fashioning

In the *Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett (1998) discusses emergent subjectivities under regimes of economic flexibility. Sennett explores the effects of post-Fordist capitalism on labour and employment, demonstrating the necessity for workers to quickly and easily reinvent themselves in the work place under new imperatives of flexibility and efficiency. The book was published at a time when Vietnam was undergoing a significant transition, establishing export-oriented industries to attract global capital. In the meantime, Vietnam has evolved into one of the main global producers and suppliers of textiles, garments, and footwear, and dubbed a middle-income country by the World Bank. Recently, Vietnam has embarked on becoming a major producer of high-tech equipment, as well. Together with the restructuring of the world system, and reconfiguration of the international division of labour, Vietnam's overall transformation from planned to a market economy has had far reaching effects at home and in the workplace. Yet, what makes the everyday experiences of Vietnamese labourers and consumers differ from the flexible subjectivities outlined by Sennett twenty years ago is the marriage of neoliberalism with authoritarianism.

The impacts of so-called "market socialism," "market Leninism," or "late socialism" on living conditions in general, and the labour force in particular, have been of particular concern to scholars working on contemporary Vietnam (Harms 2016; Nguyen 2015; Nguyen 2019; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). In fact, many of these scholars see many more parallels to developments in China than with (post-)industrialized countries of the West. While the term neoliberalism has been used to describe economic processes of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization around the world, Andrew Kipnis (2007) reminds us that the use and analytic value of the term "neoliberalism" needs to be questioned, particularly in the context of socialist histories. What is of particular interest for Vietnam is the continuous conflation of neoliber-

alist with socialist values. Aihwa Ong (2008) conceptualizes neoliberalism as a travelling logic, which stimulates practices of self-enterprise and self-reflexivity in contexts of market uncertainty. She further argues that neoliberal values promote self-entrepreneurship, self-initiative, and self-investment. Scholars agree that such neoliberal traits merge well with the local culture and post-reform governmentality: in China with the construction of a "harmonious society," and in Vietnam claims for moral personhood (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012; Hoffman 2008; Li Zhang 2018). Li Zhang (2012: 661) considers the current political economies of Vietnam and China "a bricolage of practices that best suit the local condition and global order."

As a result of this bricolage of practices and technologies, multiple and oftentimes contradictory logics circulate in contemporary Vietnam, such as the following: discourses about achieving a higher quality of life through market economy and free trade, discourses about optimization achieved through privatization and self-regulation, and finally discourses on the moralization of efficiency, quality, and accountability necessary to produce modern and civilized citizens (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). In such discourses, constant self-assessment, self-optimization and self-advancement under the logic of the free market actually dovetail with ideals propagated by the socialist state, including self-criticism and demands for moral personhood. In her recent monograph *Waste and Wealth*, Minh Nguyen (2019) aptly shows how market socialism poses contradictory demands on individuals, as they must navigate between order and stability on the one hand, and development and prosperity on the other. What she refers to as a moral project pulls together local moral-economic values, neoliberal ideas of self-reliance, and a socialist ethos. The result is a moral subject that is simultaneously enterprising and giving. According to Nguyen, this ethics of striving result in "tireless pursuits of money, wealth, and power," while constantly emphasizing self-responsibility and self-enterprise. In other words, if the modern citizen fails to acquire wealth and power by their means and efforts, it is because they did not enterprise hard enough, they did not dare enough, and they were not responsible enough (Nguyen 2019: 172).

These ethics of striving thus have major implications for the acquisition of skills and the labour market. In her analysis of "patriotic professionalism," Lisa Hoffman (2008) notes that the freedom of job choice in post-Mao China is, indeed, a mechanism of governing and subjectification. Freedom, in this context, does not indicate an absence of power. Rather, following Michel Foucault's analysis of "governmentality," Hoffman considers freedom as a tech-

nique of governance that manages and regulates subjects based on the primacy of freedom. Nonetheless, neoliberal governmental forms of China are distinct from those elsewhere in the world, due to the patriotism imbued in the ethos of self-enterprise and freedom of choice. Such patriotism builds on Maoist notions of loyalty and the emphasis for China to be a strong nation on the global stage. Under high socialism, jobs were centrally assigned. This meant that the acquisition of skills served the primary goal of enhancing an organization's performance, which in turn meant pursuing the political objectives of party leaders, rather than personal career aspirations, let alone individual fulfilment. On the contrary, the development of skills to realize personal career goals was deemed politically unacceptable. However, this shifted in the post-Mao area, as the "inefficiencies" of the planned economy came to be described precisely through the disregard of individual skill and the hoarding of labour. Nowadays, graduates in China look for jobs that match the knowledge they acquired at universities, and that offer work environments that advance their individual professional development.

Schwenkel (2011: 133) alludes to a similar development in Vietnam when explaining how contemporary youth in Hanoi make use of global market opportunities to fulfil both their familial and national duties. Schwenkel describes a group of university students from Viet Tri who, when asked about what they desired the most for their future, answered that they wished for the betterment of their families and the nation. They agreed that education was key to achieving such goals. Schwenkel exemplifies this point with the case of Mai, a young Hanoian woman in her mid-twenties who took evening classes in international banking at the university to secure a promotion in her full-time job at a local commercial bank. Mai said: "I'll get promoted through my hard work and education, not from doing favors and socializing with the managers" (Schwenkel 2011: 136). Mai's example demonstrates Hofmann's argument about how jobs are assigned according to skills. In sum, in both China and Vietnam, individuals are considered to be freely choosing subjects, who bear responsibility for their personal wealth and well-being.

Free choice of employment is also embraced by the practitioners of hip hop. In fact, many of the dancers I met in Vietnam held higher education degrees, most of them bachelor's degrees in business or management. However, with the exception of one female practitioner, none of them made their educational background dictate their job choice. Some of the dancers started to work in positions for which their degrees qualified them, but after some time, they chose to quit their jobs in order to make dance their main sources

of income. However, they did not completely turn their backs on the formal education they had acquired at university, but rather combined their professional skills with their passion for dance. Many did so, for example, by opening their own dance studios. Such forms of self-entrepreneurism not only require skills, reputation, and social as well as financial capital, but successfully operating a dance studio also requires managerial and financial skills.

Thanh Phuong, whose main source of income comes from her lead position in an internationally operating real estate company, aspires to one day open a dance studio of her own. She plans on making enough money from her current job, so that she will be able to found her own studio, ideally together with her teacher. Similar employment decisions by dancers suggest that a primary motif in their job choices is to pursue something they love and from which they find room for self-development and self-improvement. What dancers in Vietnam thus share with the Chinese workers interviewed by Hoffman is their search for work environments that facilitate self-development and the flourishing of personal abilities. However, while the latter prioritized the search for jobs that matched their university educations, Vietnamese dancers explicitly rejected jobs that might be assigned to them and match their educational background.

This difference in private job choice deserves further attention. In recent years, demand on the Vietnamese labour market has shifted from unskilled to skilled labour. While untrained labour still makes up 83% of the Vietnamese work force, demand for skilled labour is increasing. Professional workers, legislators, senior officials, managers, and technicians require tertiary educational qualifications. While the share of workers with certified training qualifications has not increased since 2007, the number of employees with tertiary education backgrounds has steadily increased (OECD 2014). According to World Bank Education Statistics, gross enrolment in tertiary education in Vietnam increased from 16.2 % in 2005 to 28.5 % in 2016. The gender bias in these enrolment ratios is noteworthy. Gross enrolment for women in tertiary education was 32 % as compared to 26% for men in 2016 (World Bank Education Statistics 2018).[18] Such increase in university enrolment correlates with the cultural value assigned to formal education in Vietnam. In fact, acquiring a tertiary education is highly encouraged by families, including those

18 Total female and male enrollment in tertiary education (ISCED 5 to 8), regardless of age, is expressed as a percentage of the total female and male populations for the five-year age group after leaving secondary school.

from rural areas, who spend savings on their children's education. The result is high educational pressure to achieve and keep up with national economic progress, which simultaneously prolongs the period of youth, particularly in urban areas (Hansen 2008). Nguyen (2019: 118) adds to this "classed sense of self that references both the state-sponsored model of personhood centred on modern human capitals and the cultural value placed on formal learning." She presents the example of a married couple of waste traders, who aspire to make enough money to send their children to university. However, as she remarks, the future of their children, even if they are able to get into university, remains uncertain, as the chances of finding an "office job" are decreasing. Accordingly, they have to look for alternative job opportunities, such as opening a streetside restaurant or seeking employment in a factory. Yet, contrary to the example presented by Nguyen, many of the dancers I got to know during my research, had university degrees, and, at least for a time, had held positions that matched their educational background.

For his part, Thanh, aka LionT, holds a bachelor's degree in English Studies from the Foreign Languages University Hanoi, which today is Hanoi National University. Minh Anh, a member of the Wonder Brothers popping crew, graduated from the University of Natural Sciences in Hanoi. Nam and Dung, members of the Funky Style Crew, have degrees from the University of Communications and Transport. Vy, one of the few female poppers from Ho Chi Minh City, studied at Hoa Sen University and works in quality assurance. Tien, a young waacker from Ninh Binh enrolled in an International Business Studies program after graduating from high school. Hoang Phuong graduated from Thang Long University in banking and finance, but then chose to work as a fitness instructor before co-founding the Wonder Dance Studio.

Nguyet studied International Business in Hanoi, combining her online work for a sports company with teaching dance classes. When talking about her university education, she carefully differentiates between what she refers to as "university knowledge," and the process of learning to dance. While she was not fond of her high school and university learning experiences, she stresses how much she enjoys learning to dance as well as foreign languages. She is quite explicit that she merely studied and did not employ her university knowledge for her job. What is more, her parents actually wanted her to become a university teacher, but she decided against their advice. She remarks with irony that she has become a teacher anyway, but a dance instructor rather than a university teacher. In fact, the human capital many of the dancers acquired during their studies of international business or eco-

nomics assists them in becoming self-entrepreneurs. At the same time, their freedom of choice is partly a function of the kinds of capitals that they control. Accordingly, they act as self-choosing and thence conscious subjects, in an increasingly competitive socialist market economy. Sherry Ortner (2006) considers actors as conscious in the sense that they are partially knowing subjects, as they are self-aware and reflexive. Ortner is particularly interested in understanding subjectivity in its relation to power, particularly those subtle forms of power that pervade our everyday lives. In Ortner's reading, agency is realized in the ways that young people, who have otherwise internalized and reflected the primacy of higher education in Vietnamese society, and are aware of the benefits that could arise from a job that matches their qualifications, nonetheless act against the circumstances and social expectations within which they find themselves, choosing instead to make dance one of their sources of income generation. With such a decision, they counteract social expectations of upward social mobility. Against what Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory might predict, their mobilities take multitudinous pathways from acquiring a university degree to finding a job as they combine and control different kinds of capital, cultural, social, and kinesthetic, to convert it into economic capital. Moreover, they counteract social expectations of moral personhood as enacted in filial piety, as their parents had often envisioned different paths for their children.

Although dance was not the main source of income for all the dancers mentioned above, many of them considered dancing constitutive of their work life, in one way or another. Thanh Phuong, for instance, considers her dance and her work life to have entered a symbiosis. Although expressing a preference for dancing, she nonetheless states that her job helps her maintain a dancing lifestyle, whereas dancing gives her the inspiration and creativity she needs to do her job well. Like Nguyet, she differentiates between "knowledge from school" and the embodied sensory knowledge she gains from dancing and travelling. She explains that "normal" people working in an office would usually apply knowledge that they acquired at school. While she considers such knowledge boring, she says that she puts everything she feels and sees around her into her job. As she works in marketing, she researches what people like and what makes them happy. She says "I can keep my mind vibrant and more creative than normal people because I have dance for balance." She concludes that without hip hop, she would not be able to do her current job: "I love my job and I love dancing together, so I wanna mix them – I can use my knowledge for dancing. So I can help more people." In this

way, Thanh Phuong shows her capacity to navigate different knowledges and to capitalize on them across different value regimes.

Ong refers to this art of defining and mixing different kind of knowledges, as well as the capacity to convert information from one sphere into value in another, as self-fashioning: "Self-fashioning thus implies not only fine-tuning oneself but also steering oneself through diverse networks of knowledge and value. Such vigilant self-practices induce an openness to contingency, and possibilities for both strategy and play" (Ong 2008: 187). Thanh Phuong engages in self-fashioning, when she puts money aside from her full-time job, and uses her skills to generate sponsors for the organization of a local hip hop event. For the studio that she hopes to own in the future, she plans to rent a building from the real estate company she works for in order to get a discount.

Dancing labour

Ong applies the term self-fashioning in relation to the growing urban elite of young professionals in China. The application of the term urban elite hints at a more general tendency toward social stratification in late socialist societies. The transformation of non-alienated labour particularly affects the so-called working class, as workers' labour is no longer considered an inalienable part of socially embedded persons, but has rather been turned into a commodity or production input, and thus decoupled from its human subjects (Dunn 2004; Ong and Zhang 2008). However, Ong (2008) qualifies this argument, suggesting that in China's pre-market reform era, workers' bodies were likewise estranged as they were owned by the socialist state. Consequently, labour power and skills were not 'owned' by the individual, but rather considered a national resource and thus as part of the state-owned means of production (Bian 1994; Davis 1990, 2000 in Hoffman 2008). However, the idea of self-ownership – of and being the masters of their own lives and bodies – was a recurrent point made by many interviewees. In other words, dancing appears to maintain its social value, as an expression of non-alienation, as it is intimately linked to the body, emotions, and affect. Of course, such understanding of dance as a form of labour runs the risk of romanticizing dance as a source of income. Dancing is physically challenging, requiring good health and a great deal of self-discipline. As soon as health declines, and as the body begins to age, reliance on dance to make a living becomes a fragile enterprise, indeed. That is

why in the long term it is important that dancers own their own studios, as they can provide them with an income after they can no longer dance.

Nonetheless, most dancers were content with their current jobs, and explicitly stressed the value of doing something that they loved. Phuong Silver Monkey recalls how people asked him again and again why he got stuck with dancing, even though it was exhausting, tiring, and didn't provide him with a lot of money. Aware that dancing does not provide him with a stable job or financial rewards, he is nonetheless drawn to dancing. Not able to explain it in words, he compares dancing to love: "Like love, people just do things not knowing why, just because of love" (Hanyi 2014).

Nguyet similarly valued her dancing lifestyle, in marked contrast with her friends who had "normal" day jobs. She further explains: "some of my friends, they are not dancers. They see me now, [and think] dancing is really nice. Because they are just busy at work and then go home. Just no more life. But they cannot experience the feelings of people who join together and dance together." Nguyet's statement touches upon various dimensions, including emotional work and intersubjectivity, as well as self-determination and fulfilment. The point of affection and relationality is also made by Hamera (2007) with regard to Pilates classes, arguing that such classes are not simply physical work, but relational and affective labour, as well. While I will return to the dimensions of emotional work and intersubjectivity later, when discussing conceptions of the self, for now I would like to dwell on the aspect of self-determination or self-ownership.

According to Ong (2008), self-ownership as a neoliberal value transforms and extends the meaning of the private. Drawing on Hegel's (1967) idea of private property as being bound up with power over oneself, Ong (2008: 184) regards privatization as "control over one's property, including one's overall existence as an individual person." In other words, the dancers remain in control of their own bodies, and thus in control of their own lives. Nonetheless, dancers agreed on the difficulty of making a living from just dancing, particularly with respect to the commodification of dance. In her reflection on the status of dancers in Vietnam, Thanh Phuong adopts the metaphor of the alienated worker, recalling the role of workers in the socialist market economy as a production input or commodity:

> "… everybody just looks at dancer like a tool, like a worker. They tell me, we can dance one hour (…), I can pay you like this. But they don't know about

> dancing as an art, too. I need respect from them. That is why I never took any jobs that payed very cheap or do like a worker never."

Thanh Phuong speaks from experience, since she used to earn money from dancing, performing shows with her crew for big brands like Tiger Beer or Heineken. But for Thanh Phuong, it was always important to pitch her own ideas to the companies. Her emphasis on getting respect, on the one hand, indicates the public perception of dance as a commodity. Dancers are considered providers of a particular service in an economic exchange relationship. On the other hand, her demand of respect points to her subjective sense of self-worth as an individual and an artist.

Rufu likewise prefers an office job over making a living from dancing, as this would require her to perform at many weddings, TV shows, or do choreography for pop concerts. She makes it perfectly clear that this was not an option for her, since she wants to decide which events to join on her own, and the countries to which she would like to travel. Like her peer from Hanoi, she is strongly opposed to being told what and how to dance. "Because I know hip hop is worldwide and I want to communicate with [other dancers]. Yeah, I want a dancing life like this – not for performances or to dance for singers. I don't want that." What is more, Rufu's argument points to hip hop's translocal spatiality. As an artform that travels globally, hip hop is a medium that connects practitioners around the world, and Rufu wanted to be a part of it.

Nguyet, by contrast, chose to combine her work as a dance instructor with a stable job, but largely out of economic necessity. While she was still single, income from teaching as a freelancer in multiple dance studios might have been enough, but the income was too little to support a family.

> "(…) not too many dancers can earn money from dancing. So, they have to do other work – and yes, me too. I have a class [that I teach], but since I have family now I think that I have to do more to earn money. So, I work for a fashion company – sport wear – yes, a sport wear company. But it's online, so my time is flexible."

In her job, Nguyet negotiates her passion for dancing with her social responsibility as a married woman who needs to take care of and provide for her family. Yet, as many of the dancers in their twenties were still single, teaching dance classes simply appeared as a viable avenue to earn money. In fact, the mushrooming of dance studios all over Vietnam's larger cities helps many dancers generate income from dancing. One female dancer acknowledges

that, although all the studios advertised hip hop classes, they were not "really" hip hop classes to those who were really familiar. Although she could not verify that the classes really taught hip hop dance, she accepted the hip hop label because it would attract more customers, while still providing dancers with an income.

For the most part, dance studios and classes are attended by members of the urban middle-class. The rise of the middle class in Vietnam is testament to the increasing stratification of society under late socialism. Thanh Phuong's comparison of workers to tools, in effect, indicates that a symbolic shift has taken place in relation to the working class. According to Nguyen (2015: 187), the commodification of worker's labour "strips labour of its social values and the workers of their entitlements, thereby depriving the working class of its previous symbolic status and social power." Contemporary propaganda posters include portraits of farmers and industrial workers next to white collar workers and graduate students, propagating imagery of equal citizens, a strong nation, democracy, and civilization. The posters indicate how the formerly contested term "middle class" has become increasingly depoliticized and normalized (Van Nguyen 2012). Previously, the social fact of Vietnam's middle class used to sit uneasily alongside socialist ideology, as political leaders condemned and equated consumption with middle-classness. Consequently, the socialist state has turned to promoting middle-class living as a desired lifestyle. The semantic shift that has occurred with respect to the middle class is further exemplified in the discourse on *dân trí* (intellectual level). The state party aims to develop human resources needed for the country's modernization and industrialization, building on different levels of *dân trí*. Whereas areas inhabited by the educated middle class are considered to have a high level of *dân trí*, remote areas are not. As a result, class distinctions in late socialist Vietnam build on cultural and moral idioms such as *dân trí*, or the urban-rural binary (Nguyen 2019). Elizabeth Vann (2012) points to the ambivalence of modern Vietnamese citizens as economically successful, while simultaneously adhering to official socialist values. The result is a rather ambiguous moral landscape that citizens must navigate, which is coproduced by the state and the market.

In this context, dance instructors in particular evolve as self-determining and entrepreneurial subjects, who help participants in their dance classes maintain healthy and moral lifestyles. When asked about why children's hip hop dance classes have become so popular in urban Vietnam, dance instructors responded that many parents wanted their children to participate in

dance in order to keep them from engaging in other leisure activities that are considered morally dubious, such as video gaming. Moreover, they preferred their children to practice in an indoor studio, rather than outdoors in the park where there are many people and distractions. As a result, the provision of dance classes by the private sector offers alternatives to the state-organized youth activities, such as those offered by the Ho Chi Minh Youth Union. One of the primary goals of the youth union is to occupy young people in their spare time, and to keep them away from supposedly dangerous actions and places in the city (Valentin 2008). Social evils, like drug addiction and gambling, are associated with particular social groups, such as adolescent males and particular places in the city (Kurfürst 2012). What is more, social evils are framed as happening during spare time, and thus during leisure time. In contrast to these moral dangers, hip hop dance particularly appeals to young parents, as it involves physical exercise. Physical fitness and bodily health are highly valued in Vietnamese society. Anyone who has visited Hanoi has heard the sound of techno music accompanying vocal instructions during aerobic classes at 6 a.m. and from 5 to 8 p.m., and encountered badminton or football matches on the sidewalks. Dance studio offers such physical exercise in an exclusive, clean, and safe environment. In contrast to public spaces, where youth tend to mingle, and which are often associated with social evils or morally dubious activities (Geertman 2016 et al.; Drummond and Nguyen Thi Hien 2008), the dance studio offers a semi-public space, access to which is granted on the basis of financial transactions. Particularly in the light of increasing child obesity in urban Vietnam, parents express growing demand for exercise programs to slim down children.

Other parents encountered hip hop during their own adolescence and are therefore at ease with hip hop. Some parents who send their children to hip hop class are of my generation. Before they had children, they had practiced dance on their own together with LionT. However, many parents merely consider hip hop as just one among many modern dance styles, and they are not familiar with the hip hop culture, its history, or values. Finally, as politically contested as hip hop may be, dance labour, particularly in the form of teaching dance, has emerged as a service provided to Vietnam's rising urban middle class. The demand is justified precisely by those parents who want their children to develop into cosmopolitan moral subjects. Dance as a form of wage labour is thus a service provided to consumers, which assists others in developing and maintaining moral personhood. Further evidence for the benefits of hip hop dance as physical exercise can be found in its inclusion in curricula

at other dance studios and academies, as well as its recognition as an official discipline in the "freestyle" category of the annual Vietnam University Games. As the largest student sporting event nationwide, the 2016 Vietnam University Games were attended by 700,000 students from 68 colleges and universities across Vietnam.

The ethical economy of hip hop

Dance labour is just as much a service provided to customers as it expresses an ethic, thereby simultaneously creating moral and economic opportunities among peers. Arvidsson et al. (2008: 10) consider the hip hop economy an ethical economy in which the entrepreneurial motive extends well beyond monetary incentives of the market economy. The hip hop economy builds on transcultural codes of "proving" oneself and "representing" the community. Describing hip hop communities in Dakar, Senegal, Mbaye (2014: 405) shows that the hip hop economy is organized in a way that allows individual artists to create autonomously within the community, while at the same time becoming aware of themselves as a new generation of entrepreneurs in their city. Mbaye draws on the concepts of "peer production" and communal governance (Bauwens 2009) to emphasize that individual practitioners and the collective hip hop community in Dakar are closely intertwined. The term peer production was coined by Michel Bauwens (2009) who describes a mode of production defined by the following three determinants: 1) 'open and free' availability of raw materials; 2) participatory 'processing'; and 3) commons-oriented output. Following Bauwens, peer production incorporates elements of post-capitalist economies and has the potential to strengthen autonomous production communities. While peer production is reliant on capitalism, it nonetheless bears an emancipatory promise for an alternative logic of life that could replace the current capitalist system. By "peer to peer," Bauwens (2009: 122) refers to "a relational dynamic that emerges through distributed networks." As Mbaye shows, peer production in Dakar's hip hop community helps to sustain as well as to develop the local market. In fact, the rationale expressed by hip hop entrepreneurs in Dakar is to create a market for hip hop in a location of the Global South, which has been largely ignored by global music industry. Aware that their music rarely leaves the country, they therefore try to pave the ground for local music production. Peer production is not based on the dependent relation of wage labour, but rather relies on voluntary self-aggregation. More precisely, peer production builds on self-assigned tasks.

A necessary precondition for such peer production is that the peer producers own or control their productive assets. As a result, the productive assets are managed on the basis of peer governance (Bauwens 2009: 123). Accordingly, hip hop entrepreneurs in Dakar own their instruments and technical infrastructure, such as recording devices, which are necessary for music production. Furthermore, they engage in and have the skills for auto-production. In other words, they own both means of production as well as the skills, techniques, and knowledge necessary to manage the production process.

In Vietnam, for instance, Hoang Phuong founded the Wonder Dance Studio together with CK Animation. On first inspection, this appears to be the next step in her attempt to make money from dance, but she insists that the studio is not to make profit:

> "Because actually, my dance studio now is, how to say, it is not to earn the money from that. (…), because I teach in many, many studio, so there the money comes from. It is not from my studio. It is studio because (…), we educate and we create some people they have the passion on hip hop dance."

In fact, the Wonder Dance Studio offers an excellent example of peer production, as the founders aim to create an environment for dancers to develop skills and their own styles of hip hop and popping. Hoang Phuong recognizes that consumer demand for dance classes like urban choreography or sexy dance is higher than for hip hop classes like waacking, popping, and so on. Therefore, the studio offers the former classes to make money, which balances the lower profits from "real" hip hop classes. Consequently, hip hop dancers engage in what economists call horizontal integration. Moreover, hip hop entrepreneurs also engage in vertical integration, taking advantage of their interconnections with processes of music production. Some dancers, for instance, extend their entrepreneurial activities to festivals, media, audiovisual, and graphic design companies, as well as street wear fashion brands (Mbaye 2014: 405-406). In Vietnam, rappers like Suboi founded their own music labels, and the New York Style Crew builds the festival brand *Nhiệt* to promote hip hop culture in Vietnam. While most hip hop artists have social and business relations abroad, they focus explicitly on developing hip hop in Vietnam. Like the artists in Dakar, dancers and rappers in Hanoi are aware that Vietnam is still located at the periphery of the global music and dance industry. That is why they focus on developing local markets in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Southeast Asian region. The Juste Debout festival in Bangkok, or Whassup Doc in Malaysia, both evidence the development of a regional

hip hop scene and market. Moreover, global brands like Red Bull, which also promotes adventure sports apart from producing energy drinks, increasingly recognize Vietnam as an emerging market for investment. Evidence of this global brand's increasing interest in Vietnam is the Red Bull Dance Competition, which was held for the first time in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in 2018, and then again in 2019.

Mbaye (2014: 406) concludes by suggesting that hip hop artists engage with indirect rather than direct reward in the form of monetary compensation. This assumption resonates with earlier the observation that social recognition, such as through "giving back to the community," are characteristic of moral personhood under market socialism generally, and that winning awards and recognition from peers is particularly important to members of the Vietnamese hip hop community of practice. Their efforts to earn respect and recognition from their self-chosen community is aptly captured by the term "reputation economy" (Mbaye 2014: 407). In terms of hip hop music production, such a reputation economy is sometimes rewarded in monetary terms, as when an artist is signed by an international music label or dance company. However, participatory production in the hip hop economy is generally accomplished through intrinsic motivation, and outright passion, rather than extrinsic incentives, whereas the capacity to contribute is measured against demonstrated ability rather than prior formal proof (Bauwens 2009; Mbaye 2014). In other words, knowledge and skill need to be performed and published in some form or the other, such as by performing in public or in videos uploaded on the internet, so that dancers can be recognized by other participants in the hip hop economy.

Finally, the moral project induced by market socialism dovetails with the ethical economy of hip hop, as both build on the accumulation of social recognition and entrepreneurial practices that oscillate between the individual and collective.

Self-fashioning in hip hop

Mbaye (2014: 397) defines hip hop as an "informed product of identity politics and economic deeds." To the dancers with whom I spoke, hip hop is a way of life as they identify themselves with hip hop's sensory codes: visually with hip hop fashion, kinesthetically with breaking, and sonically with hip hop music. Moreover, hip hop has become an entrepreneurial practice for them, as well. They sell and promote hip hop apparel, teach dance classes, and orga-

nize events. Since it is difficult to make a living from dance alone, they often combine flexible jobs that match their university degrees with freelancing as dance instructors. For example, Rufu has an office job in which he works in quality assurance during the day, and either practices with her crew in the evening or teaches popping classes. Yen Hanh combines her day job, working online for a fashion company, with her dance practice in the evening. Bi Max, by contrast, felt the need to quit his job as an auto mechanic because this form of employment was not sufficiently flexible to allow him to continue dancing. Other dancers started their own businesses, opening their own dance studios like Hoang Phuong and CK Animation, or a dance academy like Thanh and his wife. However, whether working as freelancers for different studios or as studio owners, the dance instructors take their teaching very seriously. For instance, they would forego participating in a battle if it would interfere with their teaching schedule. Others like Mai Tinh Vi or Mia, who founded their own companies outside the dance field, still related hip hop culture to the fashion industry.

Mai engages in self-entrepreneurism by opening her own fashion label, Monstarock. The label uses the byname *T-Hun Mè Điên Huỷ Diệt* (Mad Cat Destroyer), which she borrowed from her pet. Her fashion label mainly produces t-shirts, baggy pants, and accessories like caps. The name Monstarock already indicates a style that integrates diverse music cultures, like rock and hip hop. The label basically consists of Mai and her boyfriend. The division of labour between the two is as follows: Mai is in charge of the t-shirt print. She learned the printing techniques by herself. Her boyfriend produces the designs for the prints. He works for Boo Shop, one of the first shops to sell hip hop street wear in Hanoi. To build up the fashion label, Mai borrowed money from the bank. When I meet her for coffee for the first time in 2018, she proudly explains that she just paid back the loan last month, saying "I am free." On the one hand, the mere fact that Mai, a young female urbanite, took a loan to build up her own business signals her detachment from the financial resources of her family, as she does not yet have a family of her own. On the other hand, the capital loan indexes the conflation of socialist and neoliberal values, as pointed out by Allison Truitt (2012). In her research on ATM use in Ho Chi Minh City, Truitt poignantly shows how the Vietnamese state initiated the transformation from a dominantly cash-based economy to a transparent and more regulated financial sector. This kind of outcome is usually associated with neoliberalism, as financial regulation and transparency signal that Vietnam is a safe location for foreign direct investments. Since Vietnam's cash-based economy

had grown precisely from citizens' mistrust of state banks, the state engineered expansion of ATM networks proceeded by making state salaries only accessible through the local banking system. However, this system was not intended to expand access to financial services, but rather to bolster the local credit system. Despite the popular view of the ATM as a material form of modernity, enabling card-holders as cosmopolitan citizens to transact and interact in the global economy, members of the new middle class found themselves rather disappointed and their individual freedom limited, as they were caught up in the domestic monetary system. The sign "out of money" effectively indexed the local crisis of trust and banking in Vietnam (Truitt 2012). Nonetheless, state engineering allowed ordinary citizens to enrol as banking consumers, and this is how Mai was able to get a loan. Her expression of feeling "free now," having repaid the loan, likewise points toward the ambivalence, on the one hand, of being able to become an entrepreneur based on the possibility of taking out a loan, whereas, on the other hand, personal freedoms are curtailed as debt ties individuals to the anonymous institution of the bank.

Mai advertises her products on social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, with the hashtag #Monstarock. She also runs an account named Monstarock on both platforms. For advertisements on social media, she models together with her sister. In addition to the online store, she sells some of her goods through a friend who owns a store in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as via 818 Shop, which is a store located south of Hanoi specializing in street wear.

Mai's self-entrepreneurism is based on self-learning. Other than the dancers presented above, Mai does not have a tertiary education. She recalls how, after graduating from high school, everyone except for her seemed to have a plan about what to do next. This situation really stressed her out. However, although she did not pursue a formal education, this does not mean that she does not enjoy learning. To the contrary, she insists that she can really get into topics she finds interesting. This recalls Nguyet's narrative about not being fond of university learning, but really enjoying to learn dance and foreign languages. In a similar vein, Mai learns in order to develop herself and improve her business. With respect to dance, she continuously develops and extends her dance technique and repertoire. As for her business, she learned t-shirt printing techniques all by herself, and recently began an online marketing class, although she later quit, as the course did not fit with her goal of selling fashion online.

Over the past two years, when she was establishing her own business, Mai mostly stayed in Vietnam, refraining from travelling abroad. What may initially appear as a trade-off between business and dance is not perceived by Mai as such. Although she missed travelling during this time, she suggests that it was actually good for her, as more people in Vietnam got to know her. In fact, she noticed that more and more people enrolled in her dance class. Still she enjoys traveling within Vietnam, such as to Ho Chi Minh City or Da Nang, to either dance in or help to judge competitions.

Mia, a b-girl and co-founder of B Nashor together with Mai, is another self-entrepreneur in the niche sector of hip hop apparel. Mia also runs her own fashion label, called "The MIAT," and sells fashion articles online via Facebook. The Facebook page is comprised of a catalogue that includes images of clothes with their price tags. The clothes can be ordered through the site. According to information available on the site, the store is located in Bac Ninh City, in Bac Ninh Province, some 45 kilometres northeast of Hanoi. In December 2019, the start tab showed a photo of Mia together with a young man, while the info tab included the phrase, "We are not alike" together with a subtext "Street style unisex."

The notion of unisex is important. Nicole R. Fleetwood (2005: 326) considers the "iconic, racialized, adorned male body" at the centre of hip hop's material and visual culture. The masculine construction of hip hop wear is essential to understanding changing gender relations and norms within Vietnam's community of hip hop dancing. Female dancers embody dance aesthetics commonly associated with fit male bodies. Of course, this is a Western reading of aesthetic embodiment (see also Bragin 2014). However, in Vietnamese media reports, hip hop culture generally appears associated with the sphere of masculinity. Hip Hop is described as "rebellious" (*nổi loạn*) and "effervescent" (*sôi động*) (Thu Thuy 2016). According to Helle Rydstrøm (2004), the male character in Vietnamese cosmology is associated with the sphere of *dương*, whereas femininity is ascribed to the sphere of *âm*. *Âm dương*, more commonly known as *yin* and *yang*, constitutes the harmony between the two opposing poles. *Yin* (*âm*) signifies the female, and connotes earth, moon, and shadows, whereas *yang* (*dương*), by contrast, represents the male and connotes heaven, sun, and light (Jochim 1986). Against the background of *âm dương*, characteristics that are "hot," effervescent, and loud are typically assigned to men.

In an interview with Thanh Nhien Online, the interviewer describes female rapper Suboi as "rebellious" (*nổi loạn*) and "mysterious" (*ma mị*). Although

these attributes may fit with the rap music genre, the interviewer asks Suboi if she, as a young woman, feels "lost" (*lạc lõng*) in Vietnamese society. Suboi answers confidently: "I have felt lost since I have been going to school." She explains that playing with girls turned out a tragedy, so she instead played with boys, which was a lot more fun. Nonetheless, she remains a woman. She finally concludes that she does not have to be part of a group that assigns her to a particular role in society (Thu Thuy 2016).

As pointed out by the interviewer, Suboi's mysterious and rebellious appearance is further underlined by her clothing choices. In fact, Fleetwood (2005) establishes a mimetic relationship between hip hop fashion and music, and specifically its lyrics. Consequently, Suboi makes use of fashion as a visual identifier of sound. Particularly in her earlier videos and album covers, Suboi mostly dresses in baggy pants, tank tops, baseball shirts, wide t-shirts, and sneakers, sometimes combining these clothes with more feminine fashion items, such as platform sneakers, tights, and earrings. In the YouTube video, *Phục Sinh Cypher* (2015), Suboi is the only female rapper among a group of all-male MCs, wearing an extra-large white t-shirt, a rose coloured baseball shirt, baggy pants, and silver hoop earrings.

Many dancers similarly dress in unisex hip hop apparel, as well. However, clothing styles differ depending on particular dance styles they practice. The chapters on different dance styles indicate that most of participants in the Popping Event at Ho Thanh Cong, and most of the b-boys and b-girls hanging around Ly Thai To, wore baggy pants, jeans, sweatpants, and large t-shirts with appropriate sneakers. As a consequence, the clothing characteristic to popping and breaking appears to either be more male-oriented or unisex. By contrast, participants in waacking events tend to dress in more feminine clothing. Even within a particular style, clothing may vary depending on the setting and occasion. In waacking, for instance, dancers appear to dress according to the occasion. Participating in a crew cypher or class, they dress rather casually in sweatpants, leggings, and t-shirts, whereas they dress up, including hair and make-up, for official events, such as a battle. However, across all the hip hop styles practiced in Vietnam, gender differences are not strongly marked by clothing. In waacking, male and female dancers dress alike. Indeed, an integral part of waacking appears to be gender play, including fashion. On the contrary, male and female practitioners in popping, breaking, and locking wear casual clothing. Mai is a good example, as most of the time she dresses in baggy pants, wide t-shirts, and base cap. The rare times she posts an image or video of herself wearing a dress, she pro-

vides the context via the post's metadata, indicating whether she is waacking or freestyling. In one of her posts she addresses her followers using the term *anh em*, omitting *chị*, as the formal version would be *anh chị em*. She asks "Does anyone know of any shop selling old clothes, one with lots of wide trousers to look handsome dancing hip hop?" The last part of the question actually indicates an association of hip hop wear with male bodies, as she uses the adverb *đẹp trai* (handsome), which is indicative of men.

In relation to hip hop wear, the adjective *đẹp trai* is also used by other b-girls on social media. For example, a female dancer from the Milky Way Crew uses the hashtag #Dep_Trai_Thuong_It_Noi when posting fashion photos of the latest hip hop wear on Facebook. *Dep trai thuong it noi* translates as "handsome people usually do not talk too much." The hashtag *đẹp trai* unites both male and female dancers in hip hop wear. The hashtag is followed by the crew names, #Bnahsor #Bigtoe #MKWfamily #Hiphopnevadie #Bboy #Funky. The female dancer who posts the photos and hashtags does not refer to a gendered form of break dancers, but uses b-boy as an inclusive term. The gender-inclusive use of b-boy recalls Asia One's take on b-boying. Asia One is a famous b-girl from the USA. In the video *What is a b-girl?* (2010), Asia One erases the conceptual difference between b-boy and b-girl, as she claims to be a part of hip hop culture, or b-boying. Moreover, she named her crew "No Easy Props," which is a warning against giving easy props (or accolades) to female dancers simply because they are female. Like all others, female dancers are entitled to props if they are good at dancing (Johnson 2014).

In the post presented above, the use of the term b-boy is particularly striking, first of all because the hashtag was employed by a female dancer, and second, because female dancers actually predominate in the photo, which depicts five women and three men. Among the five women are Mai and Mia from B Nashor, both of whom have their own fashion labels. Accordingly, the hashtags #Dep_Trai_Thuong_It_Noi and #dep trai are not only used to refer to the self, but also to promote unisex fashion.

Visual economy and female bodies

Social media facilitates self-entrepreneurism and self-fashioning in the hip hop community of practice. In peer production, social media platforms assist in producing, distributing, and sharing hip hop artists' output. Such output usually consists of images and videos showing portraits, close-ups, or full

body pictures of dancers, which are uploaded to individual or collective social media accounts and downloaded, liked, and shared by others. While social media primarily appears to build on visuality, other senses are involved in social media use, as well. Selfies are produced via the haptic experience of clicking on the camera button, while images circulated through social media platforms via the same movement of the fingers. Accordingly, touching and clicking become important haptic devices in order to distribute images of the self. Nina Hien (2012) introduces the term "haptic economy" for such self-representational practices, which builds on Deborah Poole's (1997) term "visual economy." According to Poole, the visual economy involves the production of images, including their exchange as commodities, as well as the cultural and discursive systems against which their meanings, values, and uses are assessed and assigned. In Hien's work on beauty regimes in late socialist Vietnam, haptic denotes the technique of photographic retouching. The process of digital postproduction unites technological progress with the popular belief of *sửa hình, sửa tướng*, which means that by altering an image, one can change the fate of the depicted subject. This belief builds on the art of reading face (*nhân tướng học*), as facial structures are believed to determine one's fate (Hien 2012: 475). Against this background, Hien considers the retouching of photos as a beautification technique that offers both women and men the opportunity to take their lives into their own hands and to transform their personal fates. In other words, digital technologies assist individuals in forming new subject positions through which they can articulate hopes and desires. The forming of subject positions through social media is an important feature of the hip hop communities of practice in Vietnam. Through the circulation of images, values, and beliefs are created and shared within the community. In social media, however, subject formation is achieved in the combination of (audio-)visual media with hashtag metadata. Hashtags are commonly used in microblogging, taking on a cataloguing function. Hashtags classify and catalogue information as they indicate a post's or tweet's aboutness. Rather than being metadata generated by the microblogging site, hashtags are descriptive annotations produced by users themselves. In posts on Facebook and Instagram, hashtags become part of the linguistic structure of the post. Hashtags build on intertextuality as they link to other texts containing the same hashtags (Zappavigna 2015). The intertextuality of the hashtag is amplified by its intermediality, since hashtags can be used across diverse social networking platforms. Moreover, the use of the hashtag is becoming more and more popular in print media, as well as in graffiti writing on concrete.

From a sociolinguistic stance, hashtags contribute infrastructure for forming communities and publics (Zappavigna 2015). The meanings of hashtags, however, may remain opaque to those outside the community (of practice), as they oftentimes involve abbreviations and concatenation (Posch et al. 2013). Accordingly, the hashtags #Dep_Trai_Thuong_It_Noi or #femalepopper can be easily deciphered by members of the Vietnamese hip hop community of practice or the Global Hip Hop Nation. More importantly, the social metadata of the hashtag assists in retrieving information that the user is interested in:

> "Searchable and aggregatable discourse affords the possibility of new forms of social bonding, such as those seen in mass meme participation, as well as smaller scale performances such as alignment with imagined audiences via hashtagged evaluative metacomment." (Zappavigna 2015: 289)

The adoption of the hashtag #femalepopper indexes information that is targeted toward an audience interested in female popping practitioners or produced by users for whom such content is relevant. The hashtag makes talk about female poppers searchable, while aggregating a field of discourse about the content indexed by the metadata.

The combination of videos and photos uploaded to social media, with hashtags such as #Dep_Trai_Thuong_It_Noi or #femalepopper, signify a gender discourse in hip hop dance, in which female members of the community engage in particular. Fashioning themselves in unisex or male street wear, practicing popping, breaking, locking, or waacking, they re-appropriate their bodily image and inhabit their bodies as their own (Nurka 2013: 486). Consequently, popular culture mediates alternative femininities. The publication and circulation of femininities deviating from the (heteronormative) norm also occurs in rap, particularly in recent rap videos produced by Vietnamese female rapper Suboi. Black feminist approaches to rap have long recognized the contribution of black women to hip hop music. In the early 1980s, all-women crews such as Sequence and the Mercedes Ladies, as well as mixed-gendered crews such as the Funky Four Plus One More (the only woman being the "one more"), were active in the United States. Women were not only active in the rap business as performers, but also as producers. In fact, Silvia Robinson of Sugar Hill Records signed the first widely successful rap crew, the Sugar Hill Gang, producing the 1980 hit, *Rapper's Delight*. Already in the early years of rap's U.S. commercial success, female rappers topped the music charts, such as MC Lyte, Missy Elliott, Salt-n-Pepa, Lauryn Hill. In Germany,

likewise, the all-female crew Tic Tac Toe and female rappers Schwester S. and Cora E. were quite successful. However, many of the pioneering female rappers were not as equally recognized by industry managers as were their male counterparts. With rap's increasing homogenization to target a mass audience, women rappers were marginalized and often not offered money-making record deals. As a result, many female rappers had to turn to love and romance rap, which were more in line with disco and R&B at the time, in order to cater to the music industry's demands (Emerson 2002; Forman 1994). This shifted once again in the 2010s, when female rappers such as M.I.A, Cardi B., and Nicky Menage, and Awkwafina in the U.S., or Lady Bitch Ray and Sookee in Germany, as well as queer rappers like Mykki Blanco, reconquered the world stage of hip hop, adding more gender diversity to hip hop music. The year 2019 was particularly successful for German women rappers, such as Ebow, Shirin Davis, SXTN (Juju and Nura), and others. They not only contested the male-dominated linguistic sphere of rap, but also the imagery of women in rap videos. Rap videos have long been known and critiqued for its male gaze and sexist and sexualized stance. Montage shots of single female body parts, in particular, cast women not as individual subjects but as objects of men's conspicuous consumption. Put differently, women in hip hop are often reduced to video dancers embedded with pornographic imagery (Hunter 2011; Johnson 2014). In her essay on consumption and new gender relations in hip hop, Margaret Hunter (2011) alludes to two forms of the representation of women of colour in rap videos, which she refers to as "getting low" and "making it rain." The former position refers to the interchangeable female bodies of colour that bend over (get low), while the latter refers to men throwing money at the women (making it rain) in order for them to shake. Hunter (2011: 18) contends that such displays of women of colour, mainly black women, wearing lingerie and swim suits in rap videos testifies to the "racialized gender politics of mainstream hip hop."

Rana Emerson (2002), in her analysis of U.S. music videos featuring black performers in 1998, similarly shows how stereotypes of black womanhood permeate music videos in the way that such imagery reproduces the institutional contexts of the videos' production. First, the imagery overtly focuses on the women's bodies. Emerson suggests that women's bodies are displayed according to American beauty standards, meaning that most black female performers were rather thin, and mostly under 30 years old. As mentioned earlier, moreover, women's bodies were sometimes rendered into visual pieces, displaying different body parts separately. Second, the videos imply a one-

dimensional black womanhood, as female performers are not fashioned as artists in their own right, but rather as objects for the (heterosexual) male gaze. As a consequence, mothers and pregnant women were almost entirely absent from the videos, which is not to mention the nearly complete absence of any sexual diversity in the music videos. Third, the videos deal with the theme of conspicuous consumption outlined above, mostly in the way that women are displayed in the co-presence of men, who act as their sponsors (Emerson 2002: 120, 122-123).

As a result, sexual relations in rap videos are increasingly portrayed as transactional and racialized in nature. The strip club has emerged as a public place in which men can access women's sexual services via financial transactions. At the same time, the display of women of colour in these videos reinforces "dominant narratives about African American and Latina women, and the concomitant symbolic protection of white femininity by its absence in these representations." (Hunter 2011: 25). Against this background, the idiom of "getting low" refers to the performance by women (of colour) of a highly sexualized femininity for a male gaze, whereas "making it rain" expresses men's elevated status above women, expressed through their possession of money (in high denomination bills) with which they pay women for sexual services. The result is the reduction of heteronormative sexuality to a transactional relationship, while demonstrating power differentials between men and women, both in monetary and sexual terms (Hunter 2011: 25, 29).[19]

The highly sexualized display of femininity for a male gaze has yet to become mainstream in Vietnamese rap videos, as most videos are concerned with displaying the rappers' wealth in terms of money, expensive cars, and houses. But one example can be found in the video for the aforementioned track *Hư Quá Đi* by Richchoi, which shows a long sequence of shirtless Vietnamese men fighting each other, followed by a short sequence displaying Vietnamese women in bikini tops. By contrast, the official video of Suboi's track *Công* (2018)[20], produced by Jenni Trang Le and directed by Bao Nguyen, controverts the male gaze of mainstream rap videos, thereby undermining the sexualized and racialized gender relations described by Hunter. The video follows

19 "Making it rain" also has a more explicit and vulgar meaning, as it is also used to denote men's ejaculation on women's bodies – once more a pornographic reference (Hunter 2011; Miller-Young 2008).

20 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4cQcpOLjxE

the recent trend in displaying female video dancers. However, rather than depicting women of colour in swim suits and lingerie, the video shows Vietnam's best known b-girls and female hip hop dancers wearing yellow tracksuits. The tracksuits worn in the video are indexical of the industrial setting, as the video was shot in a Toyota assembly plant in Vinh Phuc Province, northeast of Hanoi.

The Japanese brand Toyota is one of the largest supplier of cars and motorbikes in Vietnam. The female dancers are dressed as workers with the tracksuits covering their entire bodies. Beneath their worker uniforms they wear white tank tops and black flat shoes as footwear. The only display of flesh is by the rapper herself. Contrasting with the yellow of the tracksuits, and grey shades of the factory machines, Suboi wears a black bandeau top combined with wide dark-grey, military-like trousers and silver high heel boots. The bandeau top reveals tattoos along the front and back of her upper body. Suboi wears expressive make-up, consisting of dark eye shadow and red lipstick while wearing her long hair open. The female dancers, by contrast, are styled in nude make-up look, with short hair or else long hair pulled back in a ponytail. Suboi combines her feminine appearance, consisting of stylized make-up and clothing, with hand gestures and an upper body movement repertoire that is well-known in globally circulating rap videos, yet mostly exercised by male rappers. In the track *Công*, rap video and lyrics go hand in hand, yet instead of communicating a binary sex-gender ideology (Hunter 2011), the video casts women as active producers of hip hop culture, on the one hand, while literally portraying them as hard-working contributors to Vietnam's economy, on the other. The rap video departs from common pop cultural representations of Vietnamese women, as the female protagonists are "not only hustling hard to make ends meet and take care of the family, but also maintaining their strength, fierceness, swag and vulnerability" (Saigoneer 2018).

The title *Công* refers to work or labour in general, but it also refers to one of the four Confucian virtues that define women's behaviour and conduct. The virtue of *công* stipulates that women must be skilled at cooking and housekeeping, thus assigning them to roles as family caretakers, while delimiting their scope of responsibility to the domestic sphere. However, in the absence of any male protagonists, the video creates a woman's world in which the female protagonists fashion themselves as independent and autonomous subjects, whose position in society is not defined in relation to men. According to literary scholar Sabine Sielke (2011), the appropriation of formerly exclusive spaces by women can be achieved through the imitation of – what are con-

All-female crew of Công video with Suboi in the middle

Source: Công Official Music Video, 2018 Suboi Entertainment

sidered to be – "male" attributes, such as clothing or linguistic norms. Both dimensions are apparent in the *Công* video, as Suboi combines her rather feminine outfit with "male" rap gestures and word play. Moreover, through their bodily practices, the female dancers who wear "male" worker outfits appropriate and occupy the space of the factory. In one scene, the collective body of female dancers mimics a robot, aligning their staccato head and leg movements with the industrial-technical setting of the manufacturing plant. This appropriation of male-dominated spaces is, according to Sielke (2011), another dimension of mimicry.

The concept of mimicry has been adopted widely across disciplines. Originating in biology, mimicry signals similarity where there is actually difference. Mimicry thus refers to the superficial resemblance of one organism to another organism, or another natural object among which it lives. Apart from functioning as a mechanism of protection and attraction, African American, postcolonial, performance, and feminist theories consider mimicry as "projecting a space of liminality and liberation that still remains to be mapped" (Sielke 2003: 328). What is important is that the mimicry "echoes and reproduces its pretest with a significant difference" (Sielke 2003: 330). In contrast to cross-dressing and transvestism, which Marjorie Garber (1992) considers as indexical of crisis while simultaneously reaffirming and enhancing the heterosexual norm (Sielke 1998), female hip hop practitioners like Suboi, Mai, and

others engage in gender queering, as they transgress binary sex and gender norms, performing multiple identities.

Sociolinguist Ana Deumert's distinction between mimesis and mimicry contributes to a better understanding of what is going on in the hip hop community of practice. Deumert (2018: 10) understands mimesis and mimicry as two processes involved in the production and performance of creativity. Mimesis denotes the creative affirmation of resemblances, whereas mimicry signifies the transgressive creation of dissemblances. The perception of similarity and difference is linked to performance precisely through the ability to imitate, repeat, and mimic. Deumert (2018: 10) understands performance as "the performative, audience-oriented (re-)creation of similarity/difference." In other words, the representation of women in the *Công* video creates semiotic disruption and transgression within the binary gender norm (mimicry), while simultaneously forming an experiential subject through creative forms of re-presentation (mimesis) (Deumert 2018). This combination of mimicry and mimesis works on multiple levels, comprising the following dimensions: (1) gender ideology, (2) lyrics, (3) video montage and aesthetics, and (4) fashion. In what follows, I will present each dimension with respect to the video and gender performance therein:

(1) First of all, gender ideologies inform the various social positions and roles of women, men, among other gendered individuals. The video setting in a manufacturing plant indexes Vietnam's export-oriented industrialization. Since the 1990s, the government has invested in industrial and economic zones with the infrastructure necessary to attract foreign direct investments. Most of these industrial zones are located in the vicinity of Vietnam's largest cities, including Hanoi, Hai Phong, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang. The automotive industry is a fast-growing sector in Vietnam. With increasing levels of income, development, infrastructure upgrading, and rather low market penetration by four-wheeled vehicles, the Vietnam News Agency estimates automobile sales increase of 22 % in the period from 2018 until 2025 (Schmitz-Bauerdick 2019; The Economist 2018). The automotive industry is dominated by male employees. Although women outnumber men in the export-oriented industries of textiles and garments, electronics, and leather and footwear, they still constitute a minority of the workforce in the automobile industry. In general, women workers in labour-intensive export factories are hired as a cheap and flexible labour force. In export-oriented industries, they face worse health and safety conditions than in the Vietnamese formal sector. While the export sector offers employment opportunities to women with low educa-

tional backgrounds, there is little scope for upward mobility due to a lack of skills upgrading or technical training provided by the companies (Kabeer 2011).[21] As Angie Ngoc Tran (2004: 214) shows in her assessment of female garment workers, female criteria on the factory floor include nimble fingers, manual dexterity and docility, whereas male criteria include the strength to handle heavy machinery, self-confidence when cutting fabrics, and responsibility. Resulting from this gendered division of labour is a preference of men over women, especially when it comes to working with specialized machines, such as in the automobile industry. In such contexts, men are consequently more likely to receive on-the-job training, thereby permitting them to improve their skills and receive higher wages.

Thus, the female dancers in the video literally appropriate the male space of the automotive factory, as they manoeuvre heavy equipment and lift large metal hammers. What is more, the video only refers to women's productive rather than reproductive role in society. While socialism has stressed that women make active contributions to economy and society, the appreciation of women's productivity has always been side-lined by their role as family caretakers (Nguyen 2015). This "force of domesticity," as well as the "persistence of the ideology of women's domesticity in the labour market and the family" (Parreñas 2008: 9), is also promoted by women's magazines (Earl 2014; Leshkowich 2008). However, as Nguyen Thu Giang (2019a: 64) reveals, the promotion of good motherhood and women's domesticity is not unique to Vietnamese media or the socialist state, but is rather a dominant trope in lifestyle magazines from the United States, Europe, and other parts of the Global North. Along similar lines, Suzanne Brenner (1999) argues that the state under Indonesia's New Order regime was not the only actor in propagating conservative ideals about women's domestic obligations to the families, but rather that the state set the tone about what could and could not be said in public, thereby stylizing imagery of women.

Thus, the *Công* music video disrupts stereotypes about gender across cultures, which is, indeed, a major theme in the lyrics.

2) Second, the song lyrics, which alternate between English and Vietnamese, further address common representations of women. The track opens with the English lines:

21 For example in 2004 the ratio of female to male workers in textile and garments was 2.85; in electronics 2.30, and 1.80 in leather and footwear (Kabeer 2011).

Imma young Vietnamese lady, who's this?
(Who's this?)
Imma young Vietnamese lady, who's this?
(Ai đó?)
Real Saigonese pop showbiz don't fit
Real Saigonese pop showbiz don't fit
Real Saigonese pop showbiz don't fit
Real Saigonese pop showbiz don't fit

In other words, she opens with awareness of her queer position, as she obviously deviates from the norm. First, she diverges from the "real Saigonese pop showbiz" in which young women are fashioned and fashion themselves according to normative beauty standards, as talented singers who mostly produce love songs, defining themselves in relation to men. Second, she does not fit the Viet rap biz either. Although in the recent years, female Viet rappers like Linh Lam, Kimmese, and Suzie X have taken the stage, male MC's still dominate Viet rap. Although she gets "props" from male MC's for her (international) success, she is simultaneously criticized for her success, as she has gone from "underground" to "overground." Rha Goddess (2005: 342) describes this tendency in the hip hop industry as a crisis of identity, declaring "Artists who move to a place of not struggling or not wanting to struggle face a crisis of identity, or, worse, they get labeled as 'commercial' or a sellout." While many MC's aspire to become well-known rappers who are able to make a living from rap, the 'real' and authentic rappers are considered those who remain underground (Norton 2015).

Suboi lyrically acknowledges her own trespass by comparing herself to Trang Quynh. She raps: *Thông minh hay không đâu cần chứng minh như Trạng Quỳnh* [Clever or (unfounded) not, we need to prove ourselves like Trang Quynh]. Rapping "like" (*như*) Trang Quynh, Suboi deploys the stylistic device of simile. In *Book of Rhymes*, Adam Bradley (2009) differentiates between simile and metaphor in rap. The simile is used to create a direct comparison between two distinct things, establishing the comparison by using 'like' or 'as.' Metaphor, by contrast, is used when one thing is said to be the other (without the use of 'like' or 'as'). Bradley (2009: 94) concludes by suggesting that similes "shine the spotlight on their subject more directly than do metaphors," with the subject usually being the "I" of the MC. Accordingly, Suboi fashions herself as Trang Quynh. Trang Quynh, whose real name was Nguyen Quynh (1677-1748), is a folk satirical character, who criticized the

feudal system of the Trinh lords (1545-1787). The Trinh family ruled Northern Vietnam under the late Le Dynasty, while the Nguyen Lords ruled the South. The comparison with Trang Quynh works on at least two levels. First, Suboi compares herself to a folk character, causing dissonance as her sex does not match the folk character's biological sex. Second, the simile is a pop cultural reference. During the lunar new year in 2019, a Vietnamese movie by the same name was released and screened in movie theatres throughout the country. She once again breaks with stereotypes when denying that she is a "cookie cutter bitch." Cookie cutter bitch is an idiom referring to young girls who all look alike, follow the latest trends, and have no individual features or characteristics whatsoever (Urban Dictionary 2014). This is again a pop cultural reference to hip hop, as *Cookie Cutter Bitch* is a rap track by female American rapper, Snow Tha Product. In fact, video and lyrics form a symbiosis, when Suboi drops the line "Stereotype not my social life. In fact, you better say goodbye to this shadow side." The camera shows Suboi gesticulating upside down in the frame. The next shot shows the main female dancer crawling on the floor, and then quickly rising (like phoenix from the ashes), positioning herself in front of a light source.

3) Third, video montage and aesthetics: The interplay of mimicry and mimesis, including mimicry's potential for semiotic disruption and transgression (Deumert 2018), is further substantiated in the close reading of the video against the template of globally circulating rap videos. *Công* references rap video aesthetics, such as close shots of the MC. The artificial lighting emphasizes Suboi's strong make-up and the nude look of the dancers. The video montage includes some counter shots and close-ups. The close-ups are solely focused on the female rapper. Even in the counter shots, when Suboi seems to be in conversation with an interlocutor, it is always her. The first shot is a close-up of the left side of her face, with a focus on her mouth illuminated with red light while rapping, and the counter shot shows the right side of her face in a cold silvery grey light offering a response. The overt focus on the female artist is further highlighted by the all-female cast. Emerson explains that Black female artists are often presented to the public under the guidance of a male sponsor, who is sometimes so dominant that the music video seems to be about the male producer, rather than the female singer or rapper. Emerson writes: "These videos give the impression that women are unable to be successful without the assistance and creative genius of a male impresario" (Emerson 2002: 124).

Suboi's video, by contrast, opens with the logo of her own music label. After signing with and releasing her first studio album *Walk/Bước* in 2010, with the Vietnamese music label Music Faces, she founded her own company in 2012, Suboi Entertainment. While it is common in Viet Rap to have featured artists on one track, and sometimes even several, Suboi raps most of her tracks single-handedly. It is striking that she did some lyrical collaborations in the early stage of her musical career. For instance, she released the track *I Know* featuring Kim, the female hip hop artist also known as Kimmese, in 2011. Additionally, some male artists featured Suboi, such as Anh Khan in *Quê Hương Việt Nam* (2010), American Vietnamese rapper Thai Viet G in *Hold You Down* (2012), or Antoneus Maximus in his track *I Love Viet Nam* (2012), which featured Suboi, Kimmese, Thanh Bui, and others. What is more, in 2015 Suboi released the single *Trò Chơi* featuring Touliver, a major Vietnamese hip hop producer. However, since taking a break from life centre stage, she has mainly focused on rapping and producing her own music, rarely featuring any other singers or rappers. That said, in the *Công* video Suboi features Vietnam's most famous female hip hop dancers. Mai Tinh Vi was responsible for the choreography in the video and she also participated as a dancer herself. Many of the other women dancers are either members of Mai's Cun-Cun or the Big Toe Crew. Other dancers include Nguyet from New York Style Crew and Ho Tung Lam of Milky Way Crew. The lead dancer is actually a young woman from Ho Chi Minh City. While Suboi differs from the dancers in her clothing, make-up, and rapping, she does not overshadow them. One women in particular stands out as she dances solo, combining graceful ballet movements with breaking and popping moves. Yet the other dancers are also shown individually and collectively towards the end of the video, turning into a wild crowd surrounding Suboi. The female dancers express their outrage with quick fighting moves, kicking and jumping around with aggressive faces. In sum, the female rapper shares the spotlight with the main woman dancer, while lead dancer again shares the spotlight with the other female dancers.

4) Fourth, the fashion in the video further indexes the interplay of mimicry and mimesis. In her analysis of black women artists' music videos, Emerson (2002: 129) found that a focus on appearance and physical (sexual) attraction often occurred in combination with themes of independence, strength, agency, toughness, and a streetwise nature. Such combinations are also found in *Công*. While the rapper's make-up and untamed hair particularly suggest a rather sexualized image of the artist, the military-like trousers, together

with her various facial and hand gestures as well as the lyrics, jointly indicate strength, independence, and autonomy. Likewise, the female dancers demonstrate strength when mimicking the hammering of metal in their track suits, which, as shown by Angie Ngoc Tran, is usually a task assigned to men due to their physical strength. In contrast with the often-sexualized representations of female dancers in rap videos, the women dancers wear track suits that cover their whole bodies, not revealing any flesh beyond their hands and faces. In a sense, the track suits are unisex, as they serve as protection in the factory.

Overall, the combination of hip hop wear, the rapper's gestures, an (all) female cast, and the negotiation of gender roles through rap lyrics are recurrent themes in Suboi's oeuvre.

In conclusion, Suboi's self-fashioning as a female rapper must be read against her lyrics, gestures, and performance. Suboi attaches new meanings to global imagery of hip hop, challenging established gender norms, both in Vietnam and in the highly media-saturated world of rap. What is more, Suboi makes use of social media to challenge common ideals of womanhood and female body images. In 2019, Suboi gave birth to her first child. Her post on Instagram the 5th of May that year includes a video with a close-up of her unvarnished face, talking in Vietnamese into the camera. The post beneath in English says:

> "I said: I saw an article included me with a few women in showbiz who got their body back in a short time after birth based on my recent IG post and I want to say it's not true in my case, the last belly post was an old photo. I'm not trying as well as encouraging these type of "incredible" expectation on women on the media. Bearing a child and giving birth is hard work, right after we have to take care of the baby and recover at the same time, not to mention dealing with postpartum depression because the levels of estrogen dramatically decline after pregnancy. Let's just support and give women some love and understand for what they just went through. I want to say to the women who just gave birth that you did something really brave and wonderful by bringing another human being into this world and we are trying our best to raise them to be happy and decent people, that's what matter the most."

Five days later, the post had received 201 comments from both women and men, all giving her credit for telling the truth and for being authentic as a young mother. Four months after she gave birth to her daughter, Suboi re-

veals the hyperreal, declaring that the photo of her belly was taken before having given birth. Rather than recreating the illusion of a socially valued slender female body (Leshkowich 2012), she uses social media to counter the idea that mothers need to lose weight and quickly return to their prenatal body-shape. Instead, she calls for recognition of women's toughness in giving life and nurturing other human beings. Women should receive credit for this and not for their outer appearance. In this context, Suboi stresses women's role as caretakers of the family. Yet, rather than reducing women to this role or their bodies, she highlights their braveness and courage.

In the neoliberal visual economy, women magazines in Vietnam purport to draw on scientific knowledge when giving advice about how to maintain a decent and sexually attractive body, whether by physical training or diets (Leshkowich 2008). Such discourses about female bodies are side-lined by professionalized obesity discourses, which aim to confront the country's nutrition problems by drawing on medical knowledge in the form of regular health, weight, and body mass index statistics (Ehlert 2019). In her work on obesity, biopower, and the embodiment of caring, sociologist Judith Ehlert shows how the rising problem of child obesity in contemporary Vietnam aligns with dominant discourses about motherhood, holding mothers responsible for their child's eating practices. In dominant discourse, the bodies of both child and mother are closely intertwined, as suggested in expressions such as "fat children and beautiful mothers" (*con béo mẹ xinh*), or "smart children and slim mothers" (*con thông minh mẹ không mập*) (Vietnam's Nutrition Association 2017). Consequently, mothers find themselves caught up with social pressure and expectations about their own as well as their children's bodies, both during and after pregnancy. While mothers are required to quickly return to their prenatal weight, they are also expected to raise healthy children, preventing them from becoming obese. Yet, at the same time, they are constantly confronted with the visual economy of food advertisements that allude to their "maternal affection" and "love" in making their children happy, which often includes pressure to buy products of low quality and unhealthy (Ehlert 2019: 113). As a consequence, mothers are responsible for regulating both their own diets and bodies, as well as their children's food practices and eating behaviours (Ehlert 2019). Suboi addresses this ambiguous state of women's responsibility, shifting the focus from the mother's body to her state of mind. By addressing postpartum depression in her social media post, furthermore, she transgresses the boundaries between

what is considered private and public, as she addresses an intimate matter in the public sphere, paving the way for further public discussion.

Class and consumption

Suboi frequently raps about her childhood, adolescence, and the struggles she faced, as she did not follow the "conventional" and valued path for young Vietnamese urban middle-class women. Likewise, judging from their educational backgrounds and consumption patterns, many dancers can be considered as belonging to the middle class. Fashion items in particular have evolved as visual markers, indicating both class status and membership in the community of practice. Baggy pants, XXL-t-shirts, hoodies, baseball caps, and sneakers, all indexical of hip hop culture, are frequently encountered in Hanoi's urban landscape. These markers are not spatially confined to a particular locality, but shared widely around the world. The promotion of consumption and the embrace of capitalism have become crucial features of hip hop culture (Fleetwood 2005; Hunter 2011). In the hip hop studies reader, *That's the Joint!*, Part VII of the book, consisting of eight chapters, is dedicated to the commodification of hip hop. As Hunter writes: "The shift from cultural practice to commodity was solidified with the advent of gangsta rap in the early 1990s" (2011: 16). Especially in rap videos, conspicuous consumption is promoted and enhanced. This "marketing of difference" (Fleetwood 2005: 343) is actually based on an inversion of Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption (Hunter 2011). According to Veblen the so-called leisure class engaged in the consumption of highly prized commodities, yet of little utility, in order to visualize and materialize its distinction from members of the lower class, for whom consumption rested on the need to survive. In rap videos, however, conspicuous consumption is not linked to upper classes, but is in fact linked to the lower class. The videos mostly show male rappers who drive around in expensive cars, wearing designer clothes, and adorning their bodies with jewellery, thus engaging in conspicuous consumption, meanwhile still maintaining a "ghetto" aesthetic that connects their lifestyle and consumption practices to the black and Latino poor (Smith 2003). Appealing to audiences beyond the black community, elites begin to imitate the aesthetics and consumption patterns of the poor. Hunter (2011: 18) is critical of such aesthetic imitation, stating: "White listeners can consume the music and images of a corporate construction of blackness while maintaining a safe distance from black pain

and institutional racism." Although the *Công* video mimics the montage and aesthetics of globally circulating rap videos, it also visualizes the complicated relationships of class, consumption, and gender in contemporary Vietnam. The video is set in an automotive factory, alluding to Vietnam's position in the world economy as a production site providing cheap labour. Instead of displaying status markers, the collective body of female dancers is dressed in track suits, leaving no room for individuality. In fact, life on the assembly line, conducting hard labour, is the reality for many Vietnamese men and women. Instead of cruising around in expensive cars, the workers in the video literally build cars that are consumed by the rising middle class. Female rapper Suboi, by contrast, fashions herself in shiny high heel boots and camouflage trousers, showing that her "finger nails are French tips," thus indicating her class position.

According to Fleetwood (2005: 343), the promotion of "cool America" represented by black b-boys, and the global circulation of such imagery, need to be considered in the context of marketing "youthful alterity" as a stylized commodity. Yet, how does consumption in general, and commodities representing cool America in particular, fit the market socialist agenda? In colonial times, consumption practices and patterns used to serve as sensory markers of social distinction, but the perception of consumption changed with the advent of socialism in Vietnam. In her research on food consumption in colonial Vietnam, Erica Peters (2012) explores the social positioning of the Vietnamese élite and middle class through their culinary choices and practices. In the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975), elite status was expressed through the conspicuous consumption of American goods (Earl 2014). Of course, public perception of consumption has changed with the country's unification and with the overall transformation of socialism. Equating consumption with imperialism, the state aimed to transform Vietnam from a locus of consumption to a site of production. In other words, socialist ideology built on the eradication of consumerism, as it was seen as enabling individuals to acquire markers of social distinction, as well as individual pursuits of false desires. Under market socialism, this official perception of consumption has changed once again. In contemporary Vietnam, conspicuous consumption is acknowledged and even considered moral by the party-state. In other words, consumption has become an index of personal achievement, and the private accumulation of wealth is promoted by the state. Put differently, modern citizens in Vietnam are encouraged to self-fashion, such as through consumption, but only within parameters established by the party-state (Leshkowich 2012; Vann 2012).

Finally, the authors of *Reinvention of Distinction* (2012) describe the delinking of consumption from middle-class lifestyles. As a result, the middle class is considered the normal state of affairs, which, according to Drummond (2012), makes it increasingly difficult to actually see Vietnam's middle class. Consequently, it is also not easy to identify hip hop practitioners as middle class. Conspicuous consumption is part of their lifestyle, however, and particularly includes the consumption of certain branded products and fashion items, such as sneakers and t-shirts, as well as status symbols, such as mobile phones and cameras. Dancers display their latest gifts and purchased commodities in images posted to social media. On the occasion of his birthday, for example, one b-boy posted a photo of all the gifts he had received from his friends, showing two pairs of sneakers, a t-shirt and hoodie, and three different kinds of baseball caps. In short, the photo displayed a showcase of local and global hip hop brands, among them Converse and Reebok, as well as a t-shirt from Monstarock. Another photo showed another branded product that he received as a gift from his wife, the latest Sony camera system, which costs around 800 Euros.

Hip hop fashion, like the music, builds on referentiality and reflexivity. Accordingly, hip hop wear appropriates and references status symbols from the European upper class, as well as European fashion designers such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, or Givenchy (Fleetwood 2005). In the meantime, hip hop wear has evolved as a profitable business, with American designer companies drafting designs for hip hop artists, rappers, and hip hop moguls starting their own clothing labels (e.g., Wu-Tang Clan, Lil' Kim, Busta Rhymes, Outcast), or cooperating with established sports and fashion labels to promote their own fashion lines. In 2016, the collaboration between the luxury brand Kenzo X and H&M was represented by Chance the Rapper, Somalian model Iman Mohamed Abdulmajid, and female Vietnamese rapper Suboi. The campaign features a video of each celebrity wearing outfits from the fashion line. In one Youtube video from 2016, Suboi comments on the relationship between hip hop wear and her life as a rapper in Vietnam. H&M only recently opened storefronts in Vietnam. On opening day, a large crowd waited in front of the shop in Hanoi, reminding me of lines of people waiting outside Gucci or Louis Vuitton Stores on Hong Kong's Canton Road, and youth gathered in front of the Hollister Shop in Hamburg, as they waited for permission to enter. That H&M is eager to attract more and more Vietnamese customers is evident from its advertisement featuring Suboi. While H&M is typically not a brand consumed by hip hop practitioners, sports brands like Adidas, Vans, Nike,

and the like are. Interestingly, many of these sports companies manufacture their goods in Vietnam. Over the last decade, Vietnam has evolved as a major production site for the textile and footwear industry. In 2016, Vietnam was the world's fifth largest exporter of textiles and clothing (Schmitz-Bauerdick 2017). Nike, Adidas, and Timberland are among the companies producing footwear and textiles in Vietnam. While authentic foot wear is still expensive, it is increasingly available in shopping malls, while knockoff products from these brands are all sold along Hang Dau Street in Hanoi's Ancient Quarter. The economy of counterfeit goods in Vietnam is quite large, with markets for counterfeit versions for valued products, ranging from luxury products, such as Gucci bags, to fake waste products that can be traded for money (Nguyen 2019). However, hip hop consumers and practitioners seek out authentic commodities. Vann (2012) shows how Vietnam's recent status as a major production site for global brands complicates Vietnamese consumers' relationship with branded products. She describes how consumers saw themselves as "cut off from the sorts of connections—of information, fashion, ownership, and display—made possible by goods available elsewhere" (Vann 2012: 166), as foreign-branded goods were produced and consumed in Vietnam. In this context, authenticity has evolved as an important value assigned to commodities. For instance, a female hip hop dancer affirmed that she "loved" Adidas, and a few weeks later, she posted a selfie taken at an Adidas Flagship Store opening on social media.