A grief that cannot be shared: Continuing relationships with aborted fetuses in contemporary Vietnam

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Abstract[1]

For Vietnamese women who undergo an abortion, the deeply distressing experience can be extenuated by the stigmatisation of abortion and the disenfranchisement of grief relating to it. Abortion is a sensitive subject in Vietnam, embedded in moral ambiguities concerning youth sexual activities and the ancestral relationship the Vietnamese have with the dead. The aborted fetus is not easily reconciled with the act of ancestor worship and questions arise as to how women express their grief and if a continuing relationship should be sustained with the aborted fetus. Based on twelve months' ethnographic research, this article contends that some Vietnamese women are continuing a relationship with their aborted fetus within the online memorial Nghia Trang Online as a way of performing ancestor worship and expressing their grief. Through the theory of durable biography and disenfranchised grief, it will be demonstrated that a continuing relationship is formed through communication and online offerings to express grief, ask for forgiveness, share past and present experiences, and through prayer and guidance for the fetus in the otherworld.

Introduction

> *...abortion IS BAD. In our culture people who kill their babies or abort are not treated in fairways. But actually they don't care about what others think. And those people seem unsociable, I think. But they're not worth to be helped. They have to pay for what they did... I find it so messed up about those people who aborted or killed their own babies. In our*

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culture, if you get pregnant without getting married, you'll be treated like a prostitute, and prostitutes are those whom others will treat LIKE A PIECE OF SHIT. (Vinh[2], an English student in the outer districts of Ho Chi Minh City.)

Son, how are you? There are many thoughts which are piling on me and making me tired and in a terrible mood. I want to erase everything I am thinking about and start something new. I almost can't stand it anymore. I could not sleep well last night because of these thoughts. There is no one with whom I can share my feelings and it leaves me feeling uncomfortable and lonely. If I could cry I would, but these tears have run dry. I feel as I am at a standstill. Only one thing left, my little son. If only you and I could travel far away. (Communication between a member and fetus on the Vietnamese memorial website *Nghia Trang Online*; translation[3].)

The above quotations highlight differing perceptions of abortion in Vietnam. The first is by a young man on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, who feels that those who undergo abortion are morally similar to prostitutes and deserve an obliteration of societal care; an endless round of scorn should await. The second quotation illuminates online communication between a mother and her fetus, in this case a son who would never be born. The tone is reflective and insightful about her recent feelings and powerfully interweaves the living and the dead into a conjoined moment in time: while the future for them cannot be, their online communication remains. At first glance, the words could perhaps be written by any mother, anywhere. There is a familiarity to the longings and sadness examined and yet this communication is intrinsically tied to Vietnamese cosmologies relating to the dead, abortion, technology, and fundamentally to the relationship between those who abort and their unborn offspring.

While there is a large body of research concerned with Vietnamese women's suffering after an abortion (Gammeltoft 2003, 2006, 2010; Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007; Whittaker 2010), how Vietnamese use online memorials to mitigate their grief has not been studied. This article argues that abortion brings about a profound disenfranchised grief for some Vietnamese women. In the online realm however, a durable biography can be created between a mother and her fetus through direct communications and online offerings, which can help to enfranchise her grief. This article will firstly explore research concerned with the continuation of a relationship with the dead through the concept of a durable biography (Walter 1996), which is where individuals make sense of their loss through their own recollections and by conversing with others about the dead, which in turn weaves the deceased meaningfully back into their own life. Conversations and the sharing of experiences and emotions are the key elements in the continued relationships.

This article will then examine the concept of disenfranchised grief (Doka 2002) – grief difficult to express in society, and not socially sanctioned – contextualising it within literature on grief following perinatal death more widely. For those who experience pregnancy loss through abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, or other pregnancy complications[4], it

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[2] To protect anonymity minor details concerning informants, members, and those memorialised on *Nghia Trang Online* have been changed. Pseudonyms have also been utilized.

[3] Vietnamese translated to English has been noted at the end of quotes. All other quotes are verbatim. Translations in this work are the authors.

[4] While I am aware that the experiences of abortion and other forms of pregnancy loss may be profoundly different, for the purposes of this article, abortion and other pregnancy loss constitute a broader context of loss around issues embedded in the memorialisation process, including: the disenfranchisement of grief, the lack of long-term support, and the ambiguity of the body and personhood of the fetus. I weave in these other forms of perinatal loss to help compliment the theory more thoroughly as there is limited research concerning abortion and online memorialisation.

can be a devastating experience extenuated by disenfranchised grief. This section will demonstrate that in online memorials members can powerfully enfranchise their grief, remember their fetus and connect with others to discuss the deceased and find support. An overview of the project, the methodology utilised, the field site and the informant selection will then be presented.

Moving on, attitudes towards abortion and youth sexual practices are analysed in relation to ancestor worship, which is the main relationship Vietnamese have with the dead, to demonstrate significant reasons it is difficult to continue a relationship with an aborted fetus in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese believe that an aborted fetus will "haunt" those responsible and lead to future fertility difficulties. In the face of such a powerful cosmology of the dead, the question becomes, how can Vietnamese women remember their fetus?

One possible way, which is the final focus of this article, is through a continued relationship online, as Vietnamese women[5] who have undergone an abortion visit the online memorial site *Nghia Trang Online* (NTO) to create a tomb for their fetus. It will be argued that members use online communication and offerings to engage in ancestor worship, express grief to the fetus, ask for forgiveness, and pray and guide the fetus in the otherworld. Through these interactions, a durable biography (Walter 1996) is created which reincorporates the fetuses back into the world of the living.

Continuing Bonds, Durable Biography and Disenfranchised Grief

While death ends a physical relationship, research has recognised the important bonds which can continue between the living and the dead (Francis et al. 2005; Howarth 2000; Klass et al. 1996; Valentine 2008; Walter 1996). This was not always so: previous influential psychological, psychoanalytical and psychiatric models of grief and bereavement argued that after death, survivors had to detach themselves from relations with the dead through the untangling of emotional ties (Parkes 1986; see Klass et al. 1996, 5−14 for discussion). Such a paradigm defined the process of grief as being something which needed "to be eventually 'resolved' by 'detaching', 'letting go' and 'moving on'" to new relationships (Walter 1999, xi). Indeed, Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nikman note:

> The view of grief most accepted in this century holds that for successful mourning to take place the mourner must disengage from the deceased, and let go of the past…(T)o experience a continuing bond with the deceased in the present has been thought of as symptomatic of psychological problems. (Klass et al.1996, 4)

Klass et al. (1996) coined the term *continuing bonds* to express the meaningful ways individuals could continue a relationship with the dead, and were in part responsible for the shift in bereavement literature which argued that the dead could be incorporated back into the life of the living.

In the same year as this transformative research into continuing bonds, Tony Walter (1996) proposed the theory of *durable biography* that also interrogated previous grief and bereavement scholarship. Using personal experiences of loss through the deaths of his father and girlfriend, Walter demonstrated how we shape our understandings of the

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[5] Vietnamese women were not alone in their online interactions (other informants included the father, friends and sometimes other family), but for the purpose of this article I concentrate on the experiences of women. Women formed the large majority of members who visited and participated in the fetus online memorials and consequently, it was Vietnamese women who participated in the research.

deceased through our own and others' recollections in a durable biography, as the dead are once again weaved into the ongoing narrative of the living. Part of this process means that a biography created by individuals needs "to be reasonably accurate and this requires testing it against the views of others" (ibid, 13) who knew the deceased individual.

However, Walter (ibid, 15) suggests "our *need* to talk about the dead, our need reflexively to monitor our relationships with them…may be increasing, and yet…the availability of others with whom to do this may be decreasing". Reasons for this according to Walter (ibid, 15-16) include: the availability of medical staff who can explain why the deceased died; intergenerational differences in grieving; religious decline; family and work relationships, and "longevity combined with geographical mobility. Those who knew the dead person are often physically separated from one another" (ibid, 16). The question arises then as to how in modern societies, where there is a "disembedding from place, from tradition and from kin" (ibid, 15) and a difficulty in finding people to talk to about the dead, do individuals still create such a durable biography?

Walter demonstrated the need to talk with others, through the example of self help groups with members who "have had similar experiences and share one's own feelings. There is a sharing of experience. They do not share objective knowledge of the deceased, but, having suffered the same category of loss, they do have similar feelings" (Walter 1996, 18). Thus while not knowing the deceased personally, it is the sharing of feeling with those who can understand and emphasize which becomes meaningful in the creation of a durable biography. This is vital for individuals whose grief is disenfranchised.

Kenneth Doka (1999, 37) defines disenfranchised grief as "experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported". Subsequently, "it can be much more difficult to mourn and reactions are often complicated" (ibid). This is in stark contrast to enfranchised grief in which individuals feel their grief is sanctioned and supported by society, and that they are free to express it (Corr 2002, 41). Doka (2002, 10-14) is concerned with how difficult deaths (due to AIDS, suicide or homicide, etc.) contribute to a sense of disenfranchised grief. In this context, perinatal loss can lead to a profoundly difficult grief for survivors, and the following section examines why this is and how online memorials can play their part in the enfranchisement of grief.

Perhaps they just don't know what to say[6]: Pregnancy Loss, Silence and Memorialisation

The experience of pregnancy loss – through abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth – is for many individuals a deeply painful experience, extenuated by the disenfranchisement of grief (Lang et al. 2001; Layne 1997; Martel 2014; Weaver-Hightower 2012, 473). Marcus Weaver-Hightower (2012, 473) hauntingly illustrates the disenfranchisement of grief and the rupture in social relationships through the personal experience of the stillbirth of his daughter Matilda:

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[6] Weaver-Hightower 2012, 473.

> …(B)eing the parent of a stillborn child bestows a stigma. You become the living representation of the worst-case scenario. You are 'those poor people,' and consciously or not some people pull away. Perhaps they fear your bad luck rubbing off. Perhaps they just don't know what to say. (Weaver-Hightower 2012, 473.)

Similarly Linda Layne (1997, 292) writes of the profound effect related to the "cultural denial of pregnancy loss", wherein "relatives, friends, and co-workers pretend that nothing happened". Doka supports this, stating:

> Perinatal deaths lead to strong grief reactions, yet research indicates that many still perceive the loss to be relatively minor… An abortion, too, can constitute a serious loss…but the abortion can take place without the knowledge or sanction of others or even the recognition that a loss has occurred. (Doka 2002, 11.)

Not yet a citizen of society and yet deeply treasured by the living, the loss of life through pregnancy loss is enmeshed in ambiguities, often a lack of body and social identity, which extenuates the loss dramatically for those involved (see Lang et al. 2001, 184). How then can individuals express their grief and relate to others with similar experiences of loss?

Online memorialisation is one way that individuals are engaging with pregnancy loss, through: expressing emotions relating to loss; remembering their child through written, audio and visual communication; connecting with a wider online community[7] of members; and accessing relevant information (Flohr Sørensen 2011; Godel 2007; Kean 2009; Refslund Christensen & Sandvik 2013). As Helen Kean (2009, 157–158) observes, "the technology of the Internet has clearly been central to the flourishing of pregnancy loss discourse and memorialization", noting that the discourse of loss as examined through her research, primarily in a North American context, involves a narrative of prehistory and history of the child and an exploration of the future experiences they could have had in life. In these environments, individuals can resist disintegration and alienation and be "publicly acknowledged through the appropriation of new communicative technologies" (ibid., 267; for the enfranchisement of grief more widely in online memorials see de Vries and Rutherford 2004; de Vries and Moldaw 2012; Gilbert et al., 2009; Hollander 2001; Moss 2004, 78).

The field site, methodology and informants

Twelve months' fieldwork was undertaken between 2012-2013 in Vietnam within the major cities of Ho Chi Minh City (South Vietnam), Hanoi (North Vietnam) and Da Nang (in central Vietnam), through online and offline participation in the online memorial site *Nghia Trang Online* (which translates to 'Cemetery Online', also known as *Nho*

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[7] I use online community in Howard Rheingold's (1993, 57) sense as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". (For further discussions see Gruzd, Wellman, Takhteyev 2011, 1295; Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Mai which translates to 'Forever Memory') and also on Facebook[8] social networking site. NTO was created in 2008 and currently has around 70,000 members, and offers a wide array of online memorialisation options including cemeteries for children, artists, war martyrs, historic people, foreigners, Catholics, Buddhists, and pets. Online, members can create tombs for the deceased, light incense and candles, leave messages (both audio and textual) and "send" online offerings. Online offerings are the uploading of digital pictures of an endless array ‒food, drink, money, clothes, toys, cars ‒which reflects offline ancestor worship where paper objects are burnt and food placed on the family altar, which will be addressed in the next section. The online memorials generally consist of a picture of the deceased, their name, the year and place of birth, the date of death, and the location of burial. Some members meet offline and participate in death days (*gio*), cemetery visits, birthdays, weddings, charity events and social gatherings. The online memorial within NTO that is the focus of this article, the tomb for fetuses, has approximately 700 tombs. With 22,000 online candles lit for fetuses aged between 2 weeks and 5 months, it is the largest online memorial for fetuses in Vietnam.

Image 1. A tomb created in Nghia Trang online for two fetuses. One is for a fetus 12 weeks in age, the other seven weeks. Notice the online offerings which have been posted on the tomb, including: teddy bears and other toys; cakes; milk bottles; candles; images of buses and trains; shoes; flowers; and cartoon characters for young children. (Image uploaded from Nghia Trang Online.)

In recent years anthropologists have engaged with the Internet and ethnography as an important field for the studies of culture and social interaction (see e.g. Boellstorff 2008; Miller & Slater 2000; Garcia et al. 2009 for an in-depth discussion on the use of ethnography in Internet research). Defining the field from an online and offline perspective can sometimes be difficult, with a myriad of 'in-between spaces'. This research removed itself from a single bound field by necessity and moved within and between online and offline interactions. At times I was deeply immersed in the field, spending whole days on the computer within NTO. At other times I was less focused on the NTO site, and my

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[8]Facebook was also used by some NTO members to commemorate their loved ones and to connect with a wider audience. Those who visited the fetus tomb would occasionally use Facebook to chat with fellow members and to express their emotions in regards to abortion. This could be achieved through the changing of a profile image to a sad face for example, or the posting of music which reflected their mood in the Facebook feed. In this research follow up interviews with informants at times took place through the Facebook chat function, which became particularly helpful when returning to Australia.

time revolved around learning the language, visiting national commemorations, museums, pagodas and cemeteries. Informants were busy with their own everyday life and so interviews often had to be planned for distant dates.

This research has been a part of a larger PhD project conducted at Adelaide University, concerning the extraordinarily diverse intersection of death, ancestor worship, memory, forgetting and online memorialisation in contemporary Vietnam. The research has been qualitative in nature with online and offline participation/observation and textual analysis of NTO, as well as interviews and surveys. Due to the social stigma and sensitive issues surrounding abortion in Vietnam, informants were introduced to the researcher through members who were already incorporated into the research. Messages were placed both on NTO and Facebook, notifying members and moderators of my research interests and asking for any interested participants to contact me. In these ways I was able to access a cross-section of members and moderators who both did and did not visit the online fetus memorial. Interviews took place where the informants felt comfortable, usually in coffee lounges, or the parks which thread their way throughout the main cities of Vietnam. Follow-up interviews were arranged in Australia through email, Skype, NTO and Facebook.

A lot of girls have to kill their babies[9]: Attitudes to abortion, ancestor worship and the haunting by the fetus in Vietnam

In Vietnam premarital sexual activity is understood as being morally wrong from a religious and social perspective (Gammeltoft 2006, 2010; Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007). Hoa Ngan Nguyen and Pranee Liamputtong (ibid., 92) remark, "when young, unmarried women engage in premarital sex, they are considered as 'stained' and 'spoiled', and are devalued morally". Any resulting pregnancies and subsequent abortions become "an indication of illicit and immoral sexual activity; as evidence of a selfish pursuit of sexual pleasure or other personal gains"[10] (Gammeltoft 2003, 139) and compounds the stigma associated with abortion. Many Vietnamese I met expressed the opinion that abortion was morally wrong, from a religious, moral and social perspective. In Hanoi, a young student remarked: "*I'm Buddhist so Buddha said it's not good so I think it's not good either. Because the baby in a woman is still a human and they need to live. I just hope that when they have babies they could have money for them and they won't need to make a mistake*". She continued: "*a lot of girls have to kill their baby because for them it is a mistake, the family won't like that and the guy wants to leave, they have lots of bad comments made to them*". At times informants became noticeably upset when discussing abortion and likened Vietnamese who underwent abortion to prostitutes. Along with this, an important aspect of the moral devaluation associated with abortion stems from the relationship Vietnamese have with their dead, known as ancestor worship.

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[9] Quote from informant.

[10] Wider issues enmeshed with youth sexuality and abortion include: avoidance, embarrassment and lack of knowledge in relation to sex and contraception use (Binh 2012; Nguyen et al. 2006; Wolf et al. 2010); limited communication about sexual topics between parents and children (Nguyen 2009, 8–10; Trinh et al. 2009); and social and economic transformations implemented by the Vietnamese government through the Renovation (*doi moi*) (Ngo et al. 2008; Nguyen 2007, 301–308; Nguyen & Liamputtong 2007). In research undertaken in Ho Chi Minh City, Hoa Ngan Nguyen, Pranee Liamputtong and Gregory Murphy (2006, 406) note that although condoms and contraceptive pills can be relatively cheap or even free, there are fears relating to their use; many young Vietnamese displayed general ignorance and even disgust to contraception. Access to contraception can likewise be difficult for unmarried adolescents due to the social disapproval of premarital sex (Wolf et al. 2010, 60).

Ancestor worship (*tho cung to tien*) – 'remembering the moral debt' – is the "moral cornerstone of Vietnamese philosophy, religion and cultural life" (Phan 1993, 161). In Vietnamese cosmology, the dead continue their existence in the otherworld (*the gioi khac*) as family members provide offerings of food, drink and votive paper offerings (*hang ma*) at the ancestor altar. Votive paper offerings – which are primarily made of bamboo and paper to facilitate burning and the consequent transmutation to the otherworld – include everyday objects such as umbrellas, motorbikes, houses, toothbrushes, combs, iPhones, televisions, washing machines, and money; these can be used in the afterlife. Family members in turn ask for assistance from their ancestors, which can come in the form of good luck and guidance (see Bich 1998, 221–223; Endres & Lauser 2011, 124–125; Kwon 2007, 91–93).

Image 2: Online offerings within NTO, including (from top left to bottom right): towels and clothing; playschool toys; clothing for a young girl; clothing for a young baby which reads 'I love Dad'; umbrellas; wooden children's toys; a glass of milk; dessert including fruit and ice cream; and Vietnamese spring rolls. (Images uploaded from Nghia Trang Online.)

In death, not all ancestors are equal: forgoing proper funeral and burial rituals (such as where the deceased's body is absent) is a 'bad' death (see Kwon 2006, 12; Malarney 2002, 179) which creates wandering ghosts (*con ma*). These ancestors roam hungry for the nutrition of memory never served, hellishly caught between the world of the living and that of the dead (see Gustafsson 2007, 62–65). Unless appeased by appropriate offerings, the living cannot expect assistance from wandering ghosts, but instead hold them responsible for bad things that happen to them. With this in mind, the aborted dead sit uneasily in Vietnamese conceptions of the dead: they are not yet born and yet, in the words of one informant, "a soul and spirit remain".

After an abortion, ritually appeasing and remembering fetuses is problematic for Vietnamese women and their families, who are often concerned with the well-being and future reproduction of their family members in the face of 'powerful memories' (Gammeltoft 2010, 71; see also Nguyen & Liamputtong 2007) and the potential haunting of the living by the deceased fetus. Gammeltoft (ibid., 66) notes that many of her informants in Hanoi articulated the desire for a proper burial of their fetus after an abortion. Despite this, up to half decided to leave burial rituals to hospital

staff, in part encouraged by senior family members to enable the process of separating the fetus from the larger extended family of ancestors in the home (ibid., 67–69). How then can young Vietnamese women deal with their grief concerning an abortion, as well as access a community of others to share their experiences? It is the argument of the following section that Vietnamese women use NTO to express grief, continue a relationship with the deceased fetus, and receive support from other members.

No appropriate words: Sharing grief and finding support

> *The heart and my spirit are the most important thing and I could not feel them. It's hard to talk about this with friends and family in Vietnam. It is because of our Asian culture. There are no appropriate words to describe my loss and I kept the abortion secret except for one friend. In Vietnamese culture, women are not allowed to get pregnant with their boyfriend before marriage. If they want to keep their child they have to get married as soon as possible. Having an abortion is the worst thing.* (Thuy, 23 year old female, translation.)

For Thuy, a young student from Da Nang in central Vietnam, her recollections of abortion brought with them a deep feeling of remorse, which was extenuated by her silence. For a long time it was simply an experience that she knew was 'dangerous' to share with others as it would bring judgement and scorn, the type illustrated in the quote at the beginning of this article. Her boyfriend did not want to continue the relationship and even her friend could not really understand.

She had learnt of the online memorial site in a newspaper article about a young student who had killed himself, but it was not something which particularly interested her. "*I knew about Nghia Trang Online a long time before I created a tomb but I didn't really care. It was not relevant to me*". After the abortion however, Thuy's difficulty in expressing her loss led her to NTO. Thuy was not alone as immediacy was given to the online memorialisation of fetuses for many informants I spoke to, as if the floodgates had been released on a silence long sustained. On learning of NTO through newspapers, family or friends, several members talked of feeling physically shocked and saddened in some cases that they did not know of NTO earlier. It is a sentiment shared between members, as expressed to the fetuses themselves. "*I read of this website in the newspaper! So I, your mother, have come to make a grave for you*" (translation) states one member. "*Your mother knows of this site through online media. I felt indescribable joy when I realized this would be the home of you, young child. It has somewhat lessened my remorse*" (translation) writes another.

The creation of an online tomb was the beginning of members' communication with their fetus and other site users. Online, members could light 'thousands of candles' and have 'thousands of memories' for their deceased, and the deceased of others; as one participant observed, "*there are many persons who can remember my child here*", bringing the dead into a wider community of members. In comparison, offline cemeteries were described as isolating experiences. As noted by a long-term moderator of the site:

> *NTO is a special community where many people come together thinking about the person who passed away, pray for them then try their best to make the best for life, including the person who is dead and those still alive. People at NTO can share feelings, happiness and sorrow, creating friendship… it is like a big family with love, sharing and caring. Its contents are happy and sorrow, smiles and tears. Many people originally came to NTO with curiosity, but increasingly fascinated by the great humanity of it. NTO occasionally raises some problems, but these are quickly resolved…Love and sharing is equally important.* (Hanh, 37 years old.)

Interactions evolved over time and created a balance in the life of some members:

> *When I feel sad I think about people on NTO. I know I cannot fall down, it makes me strong again. I don't have the most terrible life in the world. Many people do not have jobs, are homeless, have more grief than me, have many more children pass.* (Linh, 43 years old.)

For Thuy, who created an online tomb for her fetus, the knowledge of others using the site was central to her time spent online:

> *Maybe what I have done is to share my sadness and my happiness with others. Though we have not met we understand each other. We can release inner feelings that cannot be shared with anybody else. After I made the mistake I really came to understand the feeling of those around me much more. I cared more about other people. On the tomb I can care and share the pain that other people suffered and I can understand more about them and make more friends.* (Translation)

Thuy had discovered people with whom she could share her feelings and experiences. They did not know the deceased but they had suffered the same category of loss and had experienced similar feelings (Walter 1996, 18). *Nghia Trang Online* enabled a community for Thuy, which she felt she could not find otherwise. She had had no physical site at which to burn votive paper, neither a family altar or a cemetery; her silence had effectively severed the possibility of advice and supporting words from family or friends, and the stigma of abortion meant that such succour may not have been afforded to her if she had spoken. She was, in a sense, "disembedd(ed) from place, from tradition and from kin" (ibid, 15). NTO provided a home for her fetus. The digital candles and online offerings, every pixel she used to create the online tomb, form a new tradition of online remembrance. And through the sharing of stories, her voice joins with others, her online kin. Through the interaction with other members, and communication with and offerings to the fetus (which will be discussed in the following sections) the deceased is being purposefully worked back to have a 'stable' place in that of the living.

Continuing a relationship in the online memorial

Communication within online memorials can be multifaceted and evolving; survivors can "tell the dead how much they are missed, give them updates on recent activities and reminisce" (Roberts 2012, 59), express thankfulness that the suffering is over for the deceased, relate experiences of guilt and anger (de Vries & Rutherford, 12-13), and communicate shocking directness and sincerity (Geser 1998, 7). Online memorials are not only engaging with the expression of memory and grief, they are hosting continuing relationships with the deceased.

Within NTO, communication with the fetus forms an integral part of the sustained relationship, as the fetus is told about everything from money concerns, work life, schooling, romantic relationships, friends and family, grocery shopping, arguments, and national holidays. One informant stated that she would tell the fetus if she and her partner (the fetus's father) were having a difficult time and would pray to the fetus for help. Others felt that the fetus had good and bad days exactly like them. One member demonstrates communication about the past and present, while weaving the fetus into everyday experiences. I quote several passages (which took place over a number of weeks) from NTO between a mother (Phuong) and her fetus, to illustrate the way she incorporates her fetus into a continuing relationship:

I love you child! After you died I cried every day. I cried because I missed you and I felt sorry for your father, who is also hurting. I cried because I felt it was my entire fault. I love you child. Child, I still love your father and I want to make him happy. But I am not confident to love again and I'm afraid he will suffer. When we broke up it was very difficult for your mother and I am afraid to re-live that experience now. Please child, how will I survive this? What can I do now?

Hello, my dear. Are you scared of the rain from the storm today? I intended to go out and borrow some clothing for a work opportunity but how will it go in such bad weather? I met your father yesterday. We are still angry about many things. I thought things would change for the best between us but it never seems to change.

Hi, my dear. I had a memorable work interview today although there was heavy rain in the morning. It stopped raining, and then it was sunny again. This made me happy and glad. I wanted to share this happiness with you.

Hi, my dear. Are you healthy or not? Your grandfather is sick again. He has been health checked and treated at the hospital. Could you bless him to not be sick anymore and get healthy? Please bless your grandmother as well. I love you. (All above quotes translated.)

Embedded in these seemingly routine messages underlying themes emerge. The fetus becomes a silent listener but is also asked to look after the sick grandfather, and asked questions in relation to Phuong's changing attitudes to the father. The fetus is brought into the everyday life and family of Phuong, through stories of work opportunities and observations of the weather and there is a clear desire for the fetus to intervene and be present. Far from being a passive bystander, Phuong's fetus is profoundly incorporated into her life narrative and asked to be a continued part of it.

Along with communication which imbedded the fetus into their life, members also expressed loss and regret to the fetus, apologised and asked for forgiveness, and also explained the reasons for the abortion. Fetuses were urged to understand the parent's situation and to empathise with how difficult the abortion was for them. One member states: "*Can anyone understand the pain one feels when one is handed medication and kills their child? It was the most painful day of your mother's life*" (translation). Another writes: "*Now all I have is one grave on a network compared to a happy family*" (translation). The expression of grief communicated to the fetus became a central experience for those who visited the online memorial:

Forgive your mother child! These past ten years I have not been able to forget. I cannot forgive myself that I made such a decision at a young age. This mistake cannot be accepted. Even though your mother and father now have a new life, your mother cannot abandon her past guilt. I will always love you! You are always in my heart and in my mind! (Truc, 29 year old female)

I am so sorry I have taken away the right of the child. I cannot justify my actions. I was not brave enough to give birth at the time. Please forgive your senseless and cruel mother. I apologize a thousand times because I did not keep you inside of me. The greatest happiness was your life, but now I have lost you child. I am so selfish and heartless. I love you more than everything I have in life. Peace child! (Kim, 21 year old female)

I love you child! I am sorry for not keeping you my child. I do not know what to say, so please just remember that I apologise a thousand times. Please do not blame me for this. It has been many years and I have had to repress this

pain. I have had to bury this pain in my heart. Your father abandoned me but you should not blame your father! I love
you! I believe that you still remember your mother and I am still tormented by what happened to me. Please do not be
angry with your mother. (Mai, 26 year old female) (All above quotes translated)

There is intensity in these expressions and a sense of a voice finally opening up. For a number of informants it was the first time in a long time, if ever, they had been able to express such sentiments. It is possible, in some cases, that these expressions may actually *enhance* or *extend* grief (see Klass 2006, 844–845; Stroebe and Schut 2005, 482), that these continued relationships encouraged by the very existence of the website and its community, prolong what may have been abated more swiftly in the silence; there are after all roughly 700 tombs. However, informants in this research have all reported overwhelmingly positive associations in their site participation and so I would argue that where grief is *engaged with* more comprehensively, and articulated more clearly –as resonates in the above passages –there would be a mitigation of grief. Apart from providing a forum for grief, there is another aspect of NTO that works towards lessening the severity of grief: the facilitation of online offerings, which are believed to have a very real effect on the 'life' of the aborted fetus.

To be full like the current life: **Online offerings for the fetus**

An expression of ancestor worship is the burning of paper votive objects to appease and support the deceased in the otherworld. For many Vietnamese who participated in this research, online offerings were a crucial component in the relationship with their fetus; members primarily 'sent' online offerings which expressed a concern for the soul of the fetus and its subsequent journey in the otherworld. Informants often stated that the fetuses were too small, weak and confused to comprehend their after-death journey and NTO provided a direct connection where they could assist the fetus as "*reassurance and prayers are not enough*".

Online offerings then have practical applications for the deceased; everything from toys, milk, handbags, pancakes, toothpaste, cubby-houses and croissants were uploaded. Members desired to provide them real physical comfort: baby milk and a dazzling assortment of food was offered to assuage hunger; warm clothes to thwart the cold (and which should be changed on a regular basis); rattles and other toys for entertainment and play; beds, sheets and pillows for a comfortable sleep. As stated by Hanh, who created a tomb several years after her abortion:

> *When I'm on NTO I feel that the baby can hear my words, they understand, so I also think they receive what I*
> *give them. It is important to send to NTO to feed them so they are not hungry. When I think that they need to play*
> *and exercise well, I'll find toys for them. When it's cold I'll post offerings that will keep the baby warm. In the*
> *heat I also need to send the correct clothes. It is particularly important that you do not get sick in the cold. It is my*
> *desire to do this and make baby forgive me.*

These words were stated as Hanh displayed online offerings on her computer: baby clothing (dresses, pants, skirts); milk (both fresh and formula); food (cakes, chocolate, *pho*, and chicken); as well as food and objects associated with important Vietnamese holidays, such as Tet. I asked Hanh if the soul of the fetus could eat these foods even though they were self-evidently for many age groups and she suggested that just as the living adapt and change, so too there was fluidity to the deceased in the otherworld, just like in the 'real' one. This was reiterated by several informants who noted that their ancestors would have adapted to new technology in the otherworld. After all, according to one informant, it was no use offering the dead old technology, "*for even if they could use it, technology would change*". Another

informant illuminated how the younger generation incorporated numerous Western things and felt it would not change in death, stating "*the dead are influenced much like the living*". As stated by a moderator of the online tomb for fetuses, online offerings were created because the members "*always want the baby to be full like the current life*". In this sense, Vietnamese women prayed that their fetuses had a life worth living in death. By showing concern about their fetuses' lives in the otherworld and continuing a relationship with them online, Vietnamese women are giving a voice more widely to the experience and emotions associated with abortion.

In Vietnam, remembering a fetus after an abortion is a profoundly difficult act as it is tied into concerns about sexual activities of the unmarried and of youth, and the fetus does not fit comfortably into the pervasive cosmology of the Vietnamese relationship with the dead. The mother's grief becomes disenfranchised and the question of whether to remember the fetus or not, is a complex one. This article has argued that on the memorial website *Nghia Trang Online*, Vietnamese women can enfranchise their grief through interactions with a wider audience of members who have undergone a similar loss, and through continuing relationships with the deceased. Communication with the fetus ranges from the minutiae, to the difficult matter of what led to the abortion, and these conversations join online offerings to guide the fetus in their otherworld existence. Through this, a durable biography is created both by mothers and other members and the deceased is meaningfully weaved back into the survivor's life. Together these experiences demonstrate that for some Vietnamese, online memorialisation helps to challenge the silence and stigmatisation of abortion, "*the grief that cannot be shared*"[11]. Online, silence does not reign.

Conclusion

Recently, while idling away time on Facebook, Thuy asked where I had been as my online identity had seemed to disappear. Into a world of books, I told her, speaking about the final stages of writing up a PhD. She said that she had thought of me and my research questions to her recently after she had clicked on a personalised Facebook video feature:

> *The music started and I did not even worry about what I was going to see. It did not occur to me. Then suddenly there are pictures of me as a child, and then as I am getting older. Then there is an image of tears which I created at the time* (referring to the abortion). *I felt so empty after this and I really missed my child. I am not a good mother and I regret it very much but I am the mother of the child.* (Translation)

Being the "mother of the child" was for Thuy something that would always remain, alongside her grief. The memorial site *Nghia Trang Online* provides a place for her to perform her grief, and a home for her fetus. It enables a new tradition of online offerings where mothers can continue to care for their fetuses in death, and a community of kin who listen and respond to their voice, enfranchising their grief.

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[11] Quote from informant.

Biographical note:

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