Overview: Conceptualizing ‘Borderland-Motherland’ in the Vietnamese diasporic context

In his reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism, the late scholar Benedict Anderson shows that the immediate genealogy of nationalism—both genuinely-felt and systemic manifestations—should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state.¹ The rise of nationalism in the Southeast Asian colonies was responsible for the formation of the independent nation states and their political orientation, be it socialism, democracy, or other forms. Under these conditions, three institutions of power—the census, the map, and the museum—enabled colonizers to imagine their dominion and, by extension, the control of borders and movement of bodies within and across them. The most crucial aspect of the census was its mapping of the human populations, while map-making has always been a highly politicized project in colonialism and nation-state building.² The mapping of both the human population through the census and the mapping of the land served the purpose of colonial control and exploitation. French colonizers extracted human labor to sustain and expand their colonial project by forcing the Vietnamese to work in rubber plantations, or to be shipped to France as worker soldiers.³ Southeast Asian mobilities, therefore, are intertwined with global forces such as imperialism, socialism, and global capitalism. It is with these competing and contesting historical terrains and their residues that I conceptualize “borderland-motherland” as a site of critical inquiry into the interstitial spaces in which undocumented Vietnamese immigrants move and are moved.⁴

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² Anderson, Imagined Communities, 171.
Studies of diasporic Vietnamese populations around the world have been uneven, with a strong focus on the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Western European countries—the perceived centers of Vietnamese overseas communities. Literature on Vietnamese/Southeast Asian diasporas has highlighted different forms of migration, yet the most prominent form of migration out of Southeast Asia has been induced by wars. Refugee and war-related literature has proliferated since the beginning of the SEA diasporas, taking up a variety of experiences and methodological frameworks. Early literature on Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the U.S. focused on family relations and educational success against the backdrop of the immeasurable challenges they face in the new country. More recent works on migration from Southeast Asia have become highly gendered and have addressed labor migration, marriage migration, and socialist mobilities. Immigration from Vietnam by and large emerged after the Vietnam War


ended in 1975, but there were migrations prior to this time, such as Vietnamese soldier workers in France (sojourners), exchange students and professionals to Europe and the US in the 1960s and ’70s, and so-called “war brides” who were Vietnamese women immigrating via marriage to a foreigner who had worked in Vietnam in war-related activities.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, an important but understudied topic is the various waves of unauthorized or undocumented immigrants from Vietnam since 1975. This form of migration is understudied, particularly when it comes to the Vietnamese diasporas, because of its clandestine nature. Since 2004, I have conducted research in response to the dearth of studies on Vietnamese immigrants in locations that were perceived as peripheral in the Vietnamese diasporas, such as Northern and Eastern Europe, particularly in socialist or former socialist states and on undocumented Vietnamese immigrants.\(^9\) I wish to point out and emphasize the semi-formal and ad-hoc nature of the earliest waves of migration from Vietnam upon the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the chaotic exodus on April 30, 1975.\(^10\) Shortly after the War ended, despite the new regime’s persecution, Vietnamese boat people were fleeing the country in search of freedom through their own autonomous will and means. Their determination to seek refuge at great and grave risk prompted the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) and the international community to help rescue and relocate them. I will be clear: the boat people were the first waves of undocumented immigrants from Vietnam. This observation has not been made or discussed in literature on Vietnamese boat people due to the focus on their plight, their courage, and the international efforts (albeit terminated after the mid-1990s) for resettlement. This very observation complicates and moots the criticism and/or condemnation by any Vietnamese diasporic members about the current undocumented immigrants from Vietnam (or elsewhere) in Eastern Europe and around the world.

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In the constraints of this paper, I will highlight three contexts of Vietnamese unauthorized migration: the boat people in the Pacific Ocean starting in the mid-1970s, the undocumented migrants through the Ukraine forests since the early 1990s, and the undocumented immigrants in Berlin since 1989. These undocumented trajectories are multidirectional and contextually diverse.\(^{11}\) I embrace the departure from the sacrosanct separation of nature and society seen in various bodies of recent scholarship, including political ecology, infrastructural ethnographies, and urban studies. I heed the call to integrate and attend to the non-human in urban spaces and explore what that call means for Vietnamese immigration.\(^{12}\) I intend to examine underground immigration not just via the various conduits I have identified, but also in relation to the risks therein. Of the three contexts through which I explore undocumented Vietnamese immigration, I want to call attention to the distinction or shift in legal status of the three groups of immigrants. The boat people were unauthorized immigrants that could either gain legal status as refugees in a host country or be returned home. During the undocumented migrations through the Ukraine forests since the early 1990s, migrants continued to suffer the lack of legal status after arriving in Warsaw, as do their counterparts in Berlin, who lead a precarious life in legal limbo.

It is important to note the longitudinal approach in this paper, which puts three bodies of data in conversation with each other: my multi-sited multidisciplinary research over the decades, my cross-lingual oral histories across the Vietnamese diasporas, and the visual art productions analyzed. As such, the concepts of ecology, land, and environmental geography as they pertain to visual culture will be hashed out in the next section as the ethnographic moments unfold.

**Ethnographic Movements: Intimating the Waves, the Woods, and the Walls**

This section conveys the accounts in which Vietnamese undocumented immigrants intimated the routes of migration in three contexts: the boat people in the Pacific Ocean starting in the mid-1970s, undocumented migrations via the Ukraine forests beginning in the early 1990s, and the undocumented immigrants living in Berlin as of 1989. I would like to note that throughout this paper, as well as in my research in the last two decades, I privilege the voices and perspectives of ethnic Vietnamese immigrants, refugees, and artists and treat them as both data and theories. That is, situated at the center of the discussion, these voices and perspectives reveal their radical intimacy with blood, earth, soil, and statelessness. Data and ethnographic fieldwork were collected in Vietnamese (all translations are mine). My deepest thanks go to the Vietnamese undocumented

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immigrants who made time to share their experiences with me. I hope that what I have (re)constructed is germane to the constructions that my informants have made about their own legal limbo during our encounters and in their daily lives.

**Intimating the Waves**

I first met Chị Sen at a monthly Vietnamese mass for Giáo đoàn, the Vietnamese Catholic Congregation in Stockholm, Sweden, on the first weekend of September in 2004. As I kneeled in the last pew of the small but only half-filled suburban chapel, I heeded prayers that I had not heard since I came to the U.S. in 1994. While scholarship once suggested that the cultural practices of immigrant communities are frozen in time when immigrants try to retain their roots, I argue that such practices are in fact active efforts in affirmations of ethnic identity and roots. For Vietnamese Catholics in Stockholm, these older prayers and the way they celebrated mass show how they stay connected with their cultural and social past. The prayers have migrated with people, and helped conjure a sense of belonging.

After mass, the whole congregation of about forty people traveled to Chị Sen’s home in Bandhagen, a municipality of Stockholm, where the group prayed for another hour and shared a day-long feast with all varieties of social activities, including ear-piercing, sharing of family photos and videos, exchanges of kitchen resources and appliances, and trading of personal news. Despite the quietness of Stockholm City, I came to realize that there was ample motion under the still surface of Vietnamese life there. It is with these movements—between past and present, between prayers of yore and chanting of now, between the here and there, between presence and absence, between war and peace, between Vietnam and Sweden—that I look at her intimacy with waves during her boat escape. When I left her house, Chị Sen offered me her business card and invited me to visit. Our many meetings included a recorded interview which lasted a full day.

Chị Sen was born in 1964 in Sóc Trăng, Vietnam. When she was eight years old, her father moved to a military base near Chợ Lớn. She was forced to separate from her mother because her father had a second wife. Chị Sen lived in Saigon until escaping Vietnam by boat in 1979. She stayed at the refugee camps for six months before resettling in Sweden in November of that year. As she recounted:

> My whole family escaped illegally. We paid five taels of gold per person. We did not have enough money to pay the fee, so my grandmother asked my uncle to loan us thirteen units of gold which we paid back with interest in 1,300 US dollars. Although we repaid him in money, I think we still owe him for helping us. Without his help, we wouldn’t be here today. After we paid off the loans with him, we would visit him every time we came back. Our boat was registered for two hundred people. We escaped at night from Mỹ Tho. I don’t know what happened, but there were six hundred people on our boat.
The boat was only twenty four feet. We were actually pushing elbows. There were supposed to be food and water on board. But if you sat in the middle, you couldn’t reach out and get anything. Every day they would give you a deciliter of water. My youngest brother was too young, so my family saved all of our water for him. I did not have water to drink. My oldest brother collected seawater which we squeezed lime in to make lemonade. We tried to make do with that. We were in the high sea for five days before we reached the refugee camps.

Still from Khoa Dô’s *Mother Fish*, 2009. Film, 92 min. Distributed by Titan View. © Titan View Pty Ltd.

**Intimating the Woods**

During my fieldwork in Warsaw in the summer of 2005, my various hosts accompanied me to an open-air market called the “Stadium,” or Sân Văn Động in Vietnamese, to visit the stalls and shops run by Vietnamese immigrants and undocumented workers. The Stadium was a site where Vietnamese migrants tapped into the existing networks of underground migration and the informal economies that continue to enable their ethnic fellows to come and live in the Polish capitol today. The Stadium, opened in 1955, was situated on the east bank of the Vistula River in Praga Poludnie, Poland, and constructed from the debris of the Warsaw revolution. For decades, it hosted sporting events and, in 1983, the visit of the late Pope John Paul II with over 100,000 people in attendance. After that last international function, the Stadium deteriorated. In 1989, an open-air market emerged on the site, quickly becoming the largest of its kind in Europe. The Stadium provided work for hundreds of thousands of locals and migrants including a substantial number of Vietnamese, and had an even greater role for the Vietnamese in Warsaw and Poland at large, serving as a community site for gathering and work. Even Vietnamese in
other parts of the world would refer to “the Stadium” as a Vietnamese communal destination. At its peak, the Stadium hosted around 1,200 Vietnamese-owned businesses, many of which made a fortune there. Some entrepreneurs have become wealthy through profits at the Stadium; some return to Vietnam, while others continue to arrive. At the same time, there are unknown but substantial numbers of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants who came to Warsaw through Eastern Europe, especially by walking through the Ukraine forests to evade the border patrols. In 2008, the Polish government decided to dissolve the Stadium and spent 560 million euros to construct a national stadium to co-host with Ukraine the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Euro 2012 events. The open market gradually shrank and was officially closed in July 2010. The closure was especially devastating for the Vietnamese who earned a living at this site. Nonetheless, these migrants soon forged new spaces at Marywilska in northeastern Warsaw, or at the commerce center in the Wólka Kosowska area. In an extended interview, Võ Thành Khánh recounted the treacherous journeys through the woods before reaching the Stadium:

Fifty to one hundred Vietnamese come to Poland illegally every day. They fly from Vietnam to Moscow, and stay in car trunks from Moscow to Ukraine. They go through the forest from Ukraine to Poland. Each person pays 5500 to 6000 Zloty. It is very expensive to immigrate this way. Everyone hopes to work and earn enough to repay the smuggling fee, and to provide for their family. Both the rich and the poor go through this channel. Some spend up to seven months trying to immigrate illegally. They are caught, imprisoned, and try again once released. Some try for an entire year.

Smuggled men face fewer problems than women. They all endure the lack of food and strenuous walking between sites. People walk around 200 kilometers in the forest. Women, especially young beautiful girls, run the risk of being raped. All of the girls are sexually abused. The second problem is the fee increase en route. Between sites, the fee jumps up. If the people are unable to pay extra, the traffickers beat them up and force the families in Vietnam to send more money. The smuggled people have to pay many prices throughout the journey. Many young girls jump off from the high buildings to commit suicide when forced into sexual activities. Words get out. People are frightened when they go through those sites. The smuggled people are afraid of many things. They are afraid of the police. They are afraid of the smugglers. They are afraid that they can’t pay the extra fee.

There exists a highly gendered violence in migration experiences, particularly in undocumented mobilities. As Vietnamese migrants move between the waves, the woods, and the walls, women face the most horrendous attacks that they often keep to themselves due to cultural stigma and shame. These silenced memories are breeding grounds for
prolonged PTSD and other health issues that the immigrants continue to deal with long after their arrival and resettlement.

**Intimating the Walls**

The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall marked the re-union of Germany with the *Wende* and a new era for the Eastern Bloc. The collapse of the Wall also marked a new historical moment for immigrants in former East Germany, where Vietnamese guest workers lost their contracts due to the Wende. Some returned to Vietnam with compensation from the German government, but several fought for their right to stay. Former guest workers forged an informal economy in the service sector that allowed them to earn a living, and created a niche that enabled new undocumented immigrants to come. Lê Thắng Lợi entered Berlin through a flight from Hanoi to Moscow on a tourist visa and a trafficked passage through the Ukraine forest. When I first met Lợi at the refugee camp in East Berlin in March of 2005, I was struck by his rhetoric on immigration rights and human rights. At the start of his hours-long interview, Lợi constructed himself and his family as refugees and asylum seekers, deserving but denied the right to stay in Germany. He took the initiative to relay his urgencies as a family of asylum seekers. Lợi’s migration trajectories were at times circular, with a four-year interval of reentry into Vietnam. He recalled the crossing of borders by himself, or with his wife and children:

> **I first sought asylum because of faith. In 1993, the Christian ministers here in Berlin had baptized me. I came back to Vietnam in 1995 and returned to Germany in 1999. . . In 1996, we had our first child. I planned to escape again because of harassment from the local authority. We split up and hid. In 1998, we had our second baby and life became too difficult. We either died there in Vietnam, or escaped. . . In 1999, we went to Russia and then Germany. . . I want to work, but am not allowed. I do not want to burden the German society. Had it not been for my wife and my children, to live like this [would be] suicide for me. . . There’s no return for me in Vietnam. But to stay here is barely an option. . .**

> **I have never experienced a moment of peace here in Germany. The court had just processed my refugee application, and turned it down again. I reapplied right away. Back then, the police had caught me and wanted to deport me. I got crazy. I just went nuts. Imagine living eighty days in a space that is forty by seven meters. My only friend was the watch. My only food was instant**

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13 Die Wende ("The Turn" or "The Turnaround") (1989–1990) refers to a turning point in German political history that marks the complete process of change from the rule of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany and a centrally planned economy to the revival of parliamentary democracy and market economy in the German Democratic Republic.
noodle, three packs a day. When I ate, it was only to stay alive. I had no feelings, no taste. I had insomnia. I was too shocked by the persecution and fearful for my condition. At midnight, I was soaked in sweat. I was scared and I was screaming loudly. Then the court agreed not to deport me. They forced me to report to them which church had hid me. When I came to this refugee camp, they punished me by not giving me any food stamps for three months. I just came out of six starving months in hiding, and confronted with three months without food.

Visual Articulations: The Political Ecology of Vietnam as a Refugee

A central aspect of underground immigration is risk, which I examine as “a collective construct” whose perception evolves around social factors in the context of cities as “dense networks of interwoven socio-ecological processes.”

14 The undocumented immigrants actively embrace risk as a means to claim their “right to the city” despite spatial governmentality and technologies of control. 15 They participate in what de Certeau calls “a texturology in which extremes coincide” and continue to be on the move while juggling their risk, at once “squating” and moving. 16

This section looks at the memory work of Vietnamese diasporic migration experiences and the radical intimacy that the immigrants shared with the high sea, the deep forests, and the metropolis. Through visual productions, I examine the memory affectivities in human and non-human relations in migration. In many ways, the buried memories of undocumented mobilities are like abandoned infrastructures: they are there, painfully present yet utterly hidden. In the ethnographic movements described above, undocumented Vietnamese immigrants recall how their experiences involve several complex networks of actors beyond human bodies, which continue to influence the immigrants long after the actual encounter—particularly if such encounters unfold in risky moments. As such, the migration route remains vividly real post-migration when memories coalesce with the present in an immigrant’s psyche. The waves continue to ebb and flow in the mind of former boat people, and the woods and the walls are alive in the everyday life of undocumented immigrants. Inherent in unauthorized emigration, risk is an embodied affectivity that remains strong for the immigrants, not only because the


memory of risk experienced en route often remains unprocessed, but also because the
temporal continuity of risk is mapped onto the human psyche as well as the physical
spaces it traversed. In the human psyche, the experiential reality of the earth takes
dominance over the geographical outlays, so that experiences continue to be real even in
the (physical) absences of the waves, the woods, or the walls. I will engage with the
visual productions of director Khoa Dỗ and artists Danh Vō, Jerry Trương, and Binh Thái
Danh to examine how the borderland-motherland is forged across space and time both
within and without legal spheres. In effect, I show that Vietnam itself is a refugee,
shifting from the fixed notion of a nation-state and land mass to more fluid experiential
expressions and realities. I gesture beyond the Vietnamese diasporic context toward the
recent refugee crisis in the Middle East or the ongoing struggles of immigrants at the US-
Mexico border, which very much embody a “borderland-motherland” spirit.

In particular, for the post-migration presence of the migration route, what does the
human body and memory make of travelling in a flimsy boat, floating without certainty
in the high sea, in pitch-black nights, in inclement storms? In his acclaimed feature film
Mother Fish - Cá Mẹ (2009), director Khoa Dỗ superimposed a boat escape in the Pacific
Ocean onto the sewing shop in Australia where its survivor worked in her post-migration
life to show how memories coalesce with the present in an immigrant’s psyche. The
movie recounts the story of four boat persons escaping from Vietnam in 1980 and goes
inside the mind of the only survivor as she resettles and lives in Australia. As memories
melds with the present, the survivor relives, within the walls of the factory, the traumatic
journey at sea with her sister, who continues to speak to her through her memories. As
such, Mother Fish maps the past onto the present, meshing memories—especially
traumatic moments—with everyday life after migration. Here, the memories undergo a
spatial transposition, having moved from the open ocean to inland and within the walls of
the sewing factory. The past remains real for those who continue to live it emotionally
and psychologically. In similar ways, the Ukraine forests remain real in the everyday
lives of undocumented Vietnamese in Warsaw and Berlin. For some undocumented
migrants, the forests are residual spaces in the memory; risk therefore remains ‘real,’ not
only because of the memory of risk encountered en route to Berlin, but also because of
the risk they face in Berlin. Risk is haunting. Risk is never over. Undocumented
immigrants live and relive risky experiences long after they occurred.

Memory is a form of invisible, unstable ecology. There exist physical memories
such as abandoned infrastructures. “It was here that tens of thousands of guest workers
were staying right after the Wall fell,” my host Phạm Thị Bình told me as we stood on
iced ground at a dead lamp post outside a fenced-off deserted housing complex on a
bleak night in March of 2005. Bình took in the sight, and turning to me, spoke as if to
herself: “There were shootings here, too, between the groups. You can still see the
shattered glass windows.” Her words were as if to conclude an informal pilgrimage to a
shrouded past. The memory work of risk can forge a kind of residual space that sustains
the associated fear and trauma the way the housing complex brings back haunting
experiences of gunfire and violence.
My fieldwork in Vietnamese Berlin did not begin with visits to the refugee camp and the housing complex, but these two sites keep resurfacing. They are like the void that is not truly empty, for they hold the unspoken tales of Berlin’s past and present. They are the between spaces, or the “non-place” in Marc Augé’s alternative understanding of space, and the human practices and experiences in and between spaces.¹⁷ They return to haunt the pages of my field notes and writings on Berlin. The sites suggest that while Berlin aspires to be a world city, the German capitol still has unfinished business from an uneasy past when it comes to Vietnamese former guest workers and their aborted contracts. It is important to note here that the vacated housing complex and the refugee camp, albeit sharing no historical connection pre-Wende, do connect in the post-Wende era through undocumented immigrants, who seek asylum at the refugee camp but came to Berlin because of the economic prospects created by the former guest workers. The

complex and camp are physical reminders of geopolitical projects and their remnants, the residues of a part of Germany’s recent history. While the former guest workers are now either back in Vietnam or have migrated to other parts of Germany or Berlin, the housing complex remains symbolic of a transitional time that means different things for the people involved. The housing complex reflects an abandoned project that is physically “squatting” in unified Germany. Though the guest workers had passed through these apartments during the post-Wende years and are now occupying new spaces in German (or Vietnamese) society, this space remains a part of an untold and forgotten narrative. They are landmarks that suggest immobility within the immigrants’ self-directed mobilities. Though these sites are visible public spaces, they are simultaneously obscured from the public view because they no longer attract media attention, nor do they have an active function in Berlin’s aspiring growth and ongoing changes. Like footnotes, they exist almost independent of the now bustling, hustling Vietnamese Berlin cityscapes, such as the wholesale and cultural centers, the faith communities, the non-physical communal scape of Vietnamese Multikulti, and the Vietnamese-owned businesses scattering around the city.

Residual risk can work to suture the memories of traumatic migration that undocumented immigrants once faced, long after the actual risky events have taken place. I have also argued elsewhere about the transmission of trauma and memories across generations, as seen in Jerry Trương’s most recent works entitled từ nước: từ-sinh -- boat people: lived/living/lost (2018). On March 26, 2018, Jerry Trương called me to ask for help with his forthcoming show as part of Spring SOLOS 2018, on view April 14–June 2, 2018 at the Arlington Arts Center in Virginia. Trương explained the nature of two drawings so that I could help craft the titles. He was considering, but not satisfied with, Rời Khỏi Nước (To Leave the Country), Ra Khỏi Nước, and Thỏa t Khỏi Nước. After much contemplation, I crafted the Vietnamese title as từ nước, từ-sinh, and its English companion as boat people: leaving/living/lost, both of which were used in the exhibition. The titles reflected both Trương’s drawings as well as my own interpretations of what he wanted to convey about his family’s journeys.

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18 Spring SOLOS 2018 was on view April 14–June 2 at the Arlington Arts Center (AAC) in Virginia, USA. The AAC selected artists through an open call juried by Kate Haw, Director of the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art, and Mika Yoshitake, Curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The jury proffered that “Jerry Truong’s artistic practice draws on the incomplete and informal archive of images and memories passed down from his parents, who fled war-torn Vietnam by boat. They spent time in a refugee camp in Thailand before settling in the United States where Truong, born in California, grew up largely oblivious to the trauma that they had endured. For Spring SOLOS 2018, the artist presents large-scale drawings created from charcoal and incense ash drawn from a Vietnamese ancestral altar. The drawings depict land, water, and sky, imagining the landscape that acted as both escape route and mortal threat to those fleeing their homeland.”
Từ has a double meaning: từ (bỏ)—to leave; từ (nơi nào đó)—from (a certain place). This double meaning is further complicated by the double meaning of nước, which literally means “water” or “homeland.” As such, từ nước can mean: 1) “to be from the homeland” (of Vietnam); 2) “to be from water” (the ocean in which the boat people searched for freedom); 3) “to leave the motherland;” and 4) “to leave the water.” Each of the four meanings conveys a different trajectory in the attempts to escape by boat. Though each escapee tried to leave nước (the homeland) through nước (the water/ocean), some made it to the sea and arrived at the shores of freedom, like Trương’s parents, while others died in the ocean (like some of Trương’s uncles and aunts and thousands of boat people) or never made it out to sea (like Trương’s other uncles and aunts, and other Vietnamese).

The layered meaning of the first part of the Vietnamese title is connected with the layers of meanings in its second half, tử-sinh, which literally means “death-life.” I extracted this pair from the Vietnamese proverb sinh ký, tử quy which alludes to the idea that life on this earth is impermanent, and death is the passage through which we truly come home. Here, I use the ostensibly contradicting pair to convey three different things. First, following the first half of the title, tử-sinh expresses the dangers of boat escapes and the agonies of leaving one’s home—a matter of life and death. Second, tử sinh also conveys the varying trajectories that boat people experienced: some survived, others didn’t. Third, I want to highlight Trương’s usage of nature—the ocean, the sand, the
sky—to convey the impermanence and the lightness of it all; that is, with all the trauma and pain that humans experience, one can always look to nature for a way home. In other words, in the end, we are all going home. This perspective is by no means making light of the plight of the boat people, but reaches deep into Vietnamese culture and philosophy as an attempt to understand the resilience and survival of Vietnamese people (and the Vietnamese boat people in particular). The beach, the ocean, and the sky have been in radical intimacy with the boat people in their escapes and survival. In this communion with nature, the Vietnamese boat people and all those who endure traumatic flights are always at home and coming home, grasping peace and hope amidst pain and loss.

As perfect translation is impossible, the English title is an adaptation at best and is meant to complement the Vietnamese title, as well as to stand on its own. With “boat people - leaving/living/lost,” I put the word “boat people” as the first half of the English title to index the Vietnamese exile and refugee experiences as central to Trương’s work. In particular ways, this word stirs the consciousness of the Viet people in the diasporas and that of the world since the early 1980s. As a historical marker, the word “boat people” conveys not only the experiences of those escaping Vietnam in search of freedom after the Vietnam War ended, but also the international affairs surrounding it. With the recent refugee crisis, the word “boat people” is again mapped onto bodies of
refugees trying to flee war-torn countries (Syria) or persecution (Myanmar), once more expressing the perpetual human search for freedom and dignity.

The latter half of the title, *leaving/living/lost*, gestures towards the divergent paths that a boat person might take. “Leaving” speaks of departure (on a journey for freedom, like a boat escape) and separation (from one’s country, loved ones, and a past life), of leaving behind everything, risking everything. “Living” conveys both survival (the living versus the dead) and the experience (living through the boat escapes). The word “lost” is open-ended, beckoning known and unknown interpretations about those who didn’t arrive (lost at sea), the feeling that boat people lived with during their escapes when flimsy boats floated into uncertainty in the high sea (feeling lost in the vast open ocean, losing direction), and the sense of lost hope on a prolonged journey with an inconclusive outcome. “Lost” is a word that lingers, as is “life.” The forward slashes conjure the simultaneous yet contradicting fates of boat people, even those from the same family, like Trương’s parents and their siblings. Some made it to the free world (“living”), others forever rest on the ocean floor (“lost”), but they are all connected through the water and their daring nautical flights. To be sure, Jerry Trương’s work shows no geographical specificities: the ocean, the sky, and the beach can be of any location around the earth.

Processing the past and its memories takes great contemplation and innovative expression. Artists who were born and raised after the Vietnam War ended still wrestle with the residues of wars, relocation, and conflict that inundate their sub/consciousness. Like their contemporaries of this generation, artists Bình Danh and Danh Võ have succeeded in making these residues visible and tangible. In Bình Danh's various projects, the insistence of the Vietnam War’s memories takes center stage. One of his projects, *Immortality, The Remnants of the Vietnam and American War* (2005), articulates the continuum of wars through war images on chlorophyll prints. Danh’s trademark technique of making chlorophyll prints speaks eloquently of the past and its residues, and how they migrate across time, generations, and spaces. In yet another Vietnam-related project, *Ikea, Made in Viet Nam* (2006), Danh reflects on the translocal connections of objects and memories.

It is in the act of remembering that an artist transforms the past and evokes the future. Like Bình Danh, Danh Võ revisits the past through personal experiences and has brought together fragmented personal and historical pasts. Võ draws from the historical archives to grapple with his personal past and Vietnam’s national history. In Danh Võ’s *Mother Tongue*, the viewers encounter the historical from a personal perspective. *Lot 40. Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (2013), for instance, is the nib of a fountain pen—the very symbolic instrument that inscribes the fate of Vietnam time and time again, from the French colonial period to the American involvement. Another of Võ’s prominent installations that speaks of foreign influence in Vietnam is *Go Mo Ni Ma Da* (2013). The mixed-lingo title and the historical objects across Vietnam’s recent history juxtapose Vietnam and the West, both in their interactions and their independent spaces: a Western-centric phrase that has been Vietnamized, yet reflects its French and English

origins nonetheless. The gaze is from the West, and the Vietnamization can be seen as a form of resistance or adaptation through the act of creolizing Western words. I wish to emphasize that the dualities of domination/influence and resistance/Vietnamization are key in Võ’s articulation of how Vietnam as a nation negotiated its status in world politics in the past (with present implications, to be sure). In that sense, not only have Vietnamese people become refugees, but Vietnam as a nation state was and has been a refugee in the political negotiations that took place in the West and in Vietnam. Through Võ’s works, one encounters Vietnam as a transnational refugee across historical periods and locales.

By Way of Conclusion: Un/Earthing Borderland-Motherland

I’d like to ponder the question: How does the earth map out human bodies, and how is the earth mapped out by human bodies? The world map would look very different if it were based on human movements that bleed into each other. These movements would highlight a much more complex experiential world in which a conscious historicization of the human experiences exposes how imperialism and colonization have dispossessed indigenous local populations in its throes of invading “virgin land.” There would not be neat territorial lines, no simple blood-based claims in several prominent nation-states, and no single ideology as the ultimate pretext for immigrant exclusion. If we visualize human movements and their intimacy with the earth, we can move away from historical amnesia and come a bit closer to the vulnerabilities and violence in contemporary immigration management. The “human earth” is never static, stable, or linear, and cannot be simply mapped out in plate tectonics theories. Human activities and movements show that people carry the experiential landscapes in their blood, and not just in an ancestral connection. In the act of border crossing and squatting, for instance, Vietnamese (undocumented) immigrant bodies transpose the soil they were on—Vietnam—unto the soil they traverse, be it the ocean, the forest, or the metropolis. Hence the human realities of these marginalized people render an in-between world that is lived in “thirdspace” and non-space—a spatialized and racialized “unofficial earth” of precarity. It conjures up a world that is much more reflective of human realities and experiences, “a borderland-motherland.” Borderland-motherland can be seen in relation to the earth anywhere as long as human bodies are compromised and marginalized, as in the millions of refugees still walking/camping/squatting aimlessly throughout the world today, and in the 2,300 minors being separated from their parents upon entering the US in May and June of 2018, all under the pretext of “zero tolerance.” Like her fellow displaced peoples, Anzaldúa declares: “This is my home / this thin edge of / barbwire.”


Borderland-motherland is an interstitial space over which exclusion and precarity hover, but in which hope is nursing cross-ethnic solidarity and possibilities. A true humanity is, and should always be, an option, especially for a worldwide community of dislocated, disadvantaged, and disrupted people. Borderland-motherland depicts the experiences of racialized immigrants everywhere and anywhere in the world, laden with tension, ambivalence, unrest, and death. The native peoples are displaced and denied the right to return home. Their home is no longer. The colonization of land, people, and culture has robbed non-white peoples of the right to be, cornered them into futile lands, submerged them into nameless slavery through further labor exploitation, disrupted their biological makeup through toxic food and environmental destruction, and created dependency in all aspects. But they keep rising. Hope is their soil. Solidarity is their blood.

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