

SQUATTING IN RACIALIZED BERLIN  
1975-2015: VIETNAMESE  
TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECTIVITY IN A  
CLIMACTIC DOUBLE DIVISION

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**D**iasporic communities and transnational discourses have become important research topics of late, though they have existed for centuries and their studies have remained uneven. I have argued elsewhere that the Vietnamese diasporas have emerged much earlier than the year 1975, but this historic year marks the greatest exodus out of Vietnam and the subsequent formations of Vietnamese diasporic communities around the world. In this paper, I look at the Vietnamese populations in the German capital Berlin(s). During my four fieldwork trips in Berlin (and other parts of Germany, in March 2005, June 2005, August 2005, and March 2008<sup>1</sup>), I encountered Vietnamese from

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Olivier Glassey-Tranguyen underwrote the bulk of my research and travel expenses during the March 2008 trip to Berlin. I received partial support for my March 2008 fieldwork in Berlin from the UCSD Dean's Social Sciences (International) Research Grant and the UCSD Ethnic Studies Research & Travel Grants. I thank Dr. & Ms. Nguyễn Văn Thanh for airport rides; and Dr. Markus Stauff, and Drs. Asta & Patrick Vonderau for

both East and West Germany, and heeded their expressions on the challenges of the historical 1954 North-South partition of Vietnam and the present East-West division in Berlin. I paid particular attention to how Vietnamese Berliners' perception that the North-South division, which is felt across the Vietnamese diasporas worldwide, is at its climax in Berlin.

Weaving together excerpts from field notes and oral history interviews, I show that the Vietnamese immigration experiences in Germany—which continue today—are much more complex and diverse than the perceived East-North/West-South double division. I argue that Vietnam's colonial history, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and Germany's history of division have all contributed to the continued North-South opposition found among the Vietnamese Berliners. As such, I argue that Vietnamese are squatting in racialized Berlin(s), forging a borderland-motherland diasporic subjectivity within a climactic double division. Squatting—both physically and metaphorically—is a form of resistance that enables the Vietnamese Berliners to carve out a space for themselves in an exclusionary Berlin, evoking how human bodies are simultaneously sites of transnational racialization as well as sites of transformation.

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accommodating me during this trip. I thank the U.S. Department of State, Fulbright Program; and the Swedish Fulbright Commission for according me with the opportunity to encounter Berlin as a research site for the first time in March 2005.

## FIELDWORK: OVERVIEW & MOMENTS OF ENCOUNTER

My interest in Berlin as a research site came under the auspice of attending the 52<sup>nd</sup> annual Fulbright Berlin Seminar in March 2005, hosted by the German Fulbright Commission. I was a Fulbright scholar in Sweden at the time, and received support from the Swedish Fulbright Commission to attend the event. My paper proposal “Viet Birds, World Sky” was selected for the research panel at the Seminar. I obtained permission from the Swedish Fulbright Commission<sup>2</sup> to stay in Berlin after the Seminar, and conducted fieldwork and oral history interviews with Vietnamese living there. I returned to Germany in June and August 2005, and in March 2008.

During my fieldwork in March 2005, I visited the Vietnamese homes and community facilities across Berlin, talking to both Buddhist and Catholic groups, conducting interviews with workers from various fields, experiencing lunches at Vietnamese *imbiss*<sup>3</sup>, meeting with Vietnamese originally from both the North and South Vietnam, and identifying with Berlin’s history of division when I visited the remnants of the wall<sup>4</sup>. Be-

<sup>2</sup> I thank Ms. Jeannette Lindstrom, Executive Director of the Swedish Fulbright Commission, for permission to extend my stay in Berlin and helping me make needed air travel arrangements.

<sup>3</sup> *Imbiss* (German) is a small food stand or food-to-go store, usually located on the street, near a train or U Bahn metro station or in a corner shop. Convenient for an on-the-go meal or quick snack, the several thousands *imbiss* across Berlin serve either the basics such as currywurst, pizza, döner kebab, or the ethnic varieties such as Asian and Turkish food.

<sup>4</sup> I shared my initial thoughts about Berlin and the Vietnamese communities there in an interview by Mr. Phan Đăng Hiễn, anchor for the Vietnamese section, for two consecutive sessions

fore all of these encounters, at the town hall organized for Fulbrighters as part of the Fulbright Seminar, I asked André Schmitz, the Berlin Mayor's representative, about strategies that the Berlin government had attempted to process the East-West division and its effects<sup>5</sup>. My question stemmed from my perspectives as an ethnic Vietnamese with two decades of lived experiences in Vietnam and one decade in the U.S. (at the time of this encounter). More importantly, the question was part of my engagement in transnational conversations about division and healing, particularly in the context of Vietnam and its diasporas.

My first contact in Berlin was Dr. Phạm Văn Thanh (penname Phạm Việt Vinh) through the introduction of Mr. Nguyễn Gia Kiểng<sup>6</sup>, a writer and founder of Tập Hợp Dân Chủ Đa Nguyên<sup>7</sup>. Dr. Phạm came to Alexanderplatz, where the Berlin Seminar was hosted, to meet with me.

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on Radio Multikulti in March 2005, "A Vietnamese-American Fulbrighter's Initial Observations about Vietnamese in Berlin."

- <sup>5</sup> 2005, Summer. *The Funnel*, a newsmagazine of the German American Fulbright Commission. Number 2, Volume 41. Pg 15 ("Trangdai Tranguyen, Fulbrighter in Sweden, discusses the continuing psychological division of Berlin with André Schmitz during the reception at city hall.")
- <sup>6</sup> I thank Mr. Đinh Quang Anh Thái, the then anchor of Little Saigon Radio in Orange County, CA, for introducing me to Mr. Nguyễn Gia Kiểng, and Mr. Nguyễn Gia Kiểng for connecting me with Dr. Phạm Văn Thanh.
- <sup>7</sup> Tập Hợp Dân Chủ Đa Nguyên (Rally for Democracy and Pluralism, or Rassemblement pour la Démocratie Pluraliste, RDP) was founded in 1982 by a group of Vietnamese intellectuals from the pre-1975 Republic of South Vietnam. Headquartered in Paris, the RDP has active chapters in the U.S., Canada, Western and Eastern Europe. The RDP aims at peaceful non-violent multi-party democratization of Vietnam. I had the pleasure of meeting the core group in Paris in February 2005. For information on the group, see <http://www.ethongluan.org/>.

Upon learning about my research interest, his family offered to host my post-Seminar stay. Dr. Phạm introduced me to several Vietnamese Berliners, including the Multi-Kulti Radio<sup>8</sup> host Mr. Phan Đăng Hiễn and his family, the political activist and community leader Ms. Thuý Nonnemann<sup>9</sup>, Mr. Lê Lương Cẩn the owner of Thuỷ Tiên Vietnam (Cultural and Wholesale) Center<sup>10</sup>, and several others. The Phạm family also took me to the abandoned apartment complexes in which Vietnamese guest workers had once lived and pointed out the shattered glass windows from the

<sup>8</sup> Radiomultikulti (September 18, 1994–December 31, 2008), or RM, was a multilingual radio station of the seven stations in the Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg (RBB). After 14 years, the RM was closed due to budget cuts (alongside the TV program Polylux) despite its being the only radio station for several ethnic groups in Berlin. A poll in March 2008 with Germans showed that the RM audience had the least audience at 37,000 listeners per day, versus the Radio Antenne Brandenburg with 218,000. These results failed to account for the non-German listeners that the RM served. A video clip of the last day of the RM can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DT8HzbboHkY>.

<sup>9</sup> On October 1, 2013, Ms. Nonnemann was accorded “The Order of Merit of Berlin” (German: Verdienstorden des Landes Berlin) for her services to the Vietnamese refugees since the 1970s and the former guest workers since the 1990s in Berlin and Germany. This is the highest honor by the German State of Berlin and awarded in the name of the Senate of Berlin. Recognizing outstanding contributions to the State of Berlin since July 21, 1987, the Order is awarded each year on October 1, the anniversary of the Berlin Constitution. The Order is limited to no more than 400 living recipients, and has only been awarded 359 times as of 2011. Further information can be found at: <http://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/regierender-buergermeister/auszeichnungen-und-ehrungen/verdienstorden-des-landes-berlin/artikel.6759.php>.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Phạm gave me a ride to the Thuỷ Tiên Vietnam Center and participated in my interview with Mr. Lê Lương Cẩn. The Center is listed as “Asiatische Lebensmittel \* Im- & Export \* Groß- & Einzelhandel.” It was located at Meeraner Straße 9, 1268 Berlin.

gangs' rivalries, recounting how in that small apartment complex, there were up to tens of thousands of people living during the transitional years of *Wende*. We also spent a long evening at the refugee camp in East Berlin where I met Mr. Lê Thăng Lợi and his family.

I met Mr. Phan Đăng Hiển at the Vietnam Haus (1975-2005)<sup>11</sup>, an agency under the Berlin government set up to help Vietnamese refugees and immigrants adjust to German life. Though I intended to interview him, Mr. Phan asked for a rain check and interviewed me instead for two sessions about my studies and work in Orange County and Stockholm, as well as my perspectives about Berlin and the Vietnamese populations there. Both sessions of the interview were aired on Radio Multikulti while I was in Berlin. Mr. Phan also brought me to visit a Vietnamese Buddhist family living in Berlin after the interview. I also had an extended unrecorded oral history interview with Mr. Trường Sơn (pseudonym) at Dr. Phạm's residence, who spoke in great length about how the Vietnamese North-South division is at its climax in Berlin. Dr. Phạm and his wife

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<sup>11</sup> In the late 1970s, the Berlin government created Vietnam Haus to help Vietnamese boat people integrate into German life. In 2005, the Berlin government deemed that after 30 years, their needs were met and the Vietnamese boat people have established themselves in the German society. As a result, Vietnam Haus was closed. The Vietnamese community in West Berlin has established a new organization to facilitate communal, cultural, and support programs, see <http://danke-deutschland.org>. I thank Mr. Hồ Văn Phước for bringing my attention to this new establishment and the website. On the other hand, in 1992, the Association of Vietnamese in Berlin and Brandenburg (Vereinigung der Vietnamesen in Berlin & Brandenburg) located at Sewanstr. 43, 10319 Berlin, was founded to meet the needs of former Vietnamese guest workers who fought to remain in Germany. See <http://vietnam-bb.de/>.

were surprised about the length of the interview when they came home that day, since Mr. Trường Sơn was a very quiet and private person.

In retrospect, I believe that my knowledge of the practice of tomb relocation in Northern Vietnam had catalyzed our rapport. When he first arrived at Dr. Phạm's home, Mr. Trường Sơn was very quiet and melancholic. He said, "I just came back from Vietnam where I took care of some matters for my deceased mother, who passed away a few years ago." I asked, "You meant *sang cát*?" He said, "Yes, but we call it *thay áo*<sup>12</sup>." And from that moment on, he poured out his heart without me asking too many questions. I wish to point out how my different encounters with Vietnamese in Berlin have been shaped—and even made possible—by my Vietnamese cultural knowledge and language facility. Because of his personal background and to protect his loved ones in Vietnam, Mr. Trường Sơn asked that I not record the oral history interview with him and that he remain anonymous, and I honored both of his requests. During this trip, I conducted the first fifteen Berlin oral history interviews, some were unrecorded per the narrator's preference.

In June and August 2005, I visited various Vietnamese-owned small businesses as well as florist stands at metro stations in Berlin and talked to the workers, who were eager to tell me about "my hometown" Orange County<sup>13</sup> even though they

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<sup>12</sup> Both words refer to the practice of exhuming the tomb after a certain number of years after the burial, retrieving and cleaning the bones of the deceased, and reburying them in a new smaller tomb.

<sup>13</sup> Orange County, California, USA, is home to the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam and probably the most desired location in the diaspora. Ethnic Vietnamese around the

had never been to California. At a Vietnamese takeout store in East Berlin, the workers even told me about the owner of the store, Cô Vân, an industrious worker. However, her husband allegedly slacked off in Northern Vietnam and squandered her remittances, which were meant for their daughter's college education. The workers admired her endurance, and said that they enjoyed working for her.

The sensitive information that the workers openly shared with me during such a chance encounter might be puzzling to any observer, given the North-South division between Vietnamese in Berlin. However, such openness was probably due to my coming from Orange County and my being a native Vietnamese speaker. Though I spoke with a Southern accent and the workers used a Northern dialect, the regional language distinction was nullified by the two workers' aspiration for Little Saigon. Orange County's Little Saigon came across as a common point of reference, as the workers enthusiastically told me about how they perceived it as a "dreamland" and their hope to be able to come visit one day. This instantaneous forging of ethnic connection between me and the imbiiss workers contrasts deeply with the distance between East and West Berlin Vietnamese that my various informants expressed. While I was able to chat with the workers on all sorts of topics, the conversation was refrained and avoided between Vietnamese in East and West Berlin. This double division, in the word of Mr. Trường Sơn, is at its climax in Berlin.

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world know about this place through videos, personal stories, or visits. During my Fulbright year in Sweden, the Vietnamese there told me that to them, California means Orange County's Little Saigon and Hollywood.

In March 2008, I made a fourth visit to Germany and conducted fieldwork in Berlin<sup>14</sup> where I interviewed twenty Vietnamese and participated in various community meetings and organization events. Dr. Markus Stauff and Drs. Patrick and Asta Vonderau kindly accommodated me during my fieldwork stay. Dr. Phạm and his wife gave me airport rides. Toward the end of this sojourn, I witnessed the “first encounter” between the Vietnamese Catholics in East and West Berlins at the Lent Retreat at Canisius Kolleg in Berlin—an event that I view as a symbolic beginning for reconciliation between the South and North Vietnamese communities. I visited community organization offices, Radio Multi-Kulti Vietnamese section at the RBB building, community archives, and churches. I relied on Dr. Phạm Văn Thanh and his wife for introductions to organizations of my interests, and took the initiative to contact other people by phone and requested to meet in person. Ms. Bình Nguyễn, Dr. Phạm’s wife, went with me to visit Hội Láng Giềng Phục Vụ, an NGO serving former guest workers and recent arrivals in the East.

I also asked my new contacts to introduce me to their networks. Through Ms. Mai Hà Phương, Mr. Phan’s wife, I met a few more informants, including Ms. Yến Bùi, who helped me schedule an interview with her brother, Rev. Antôn Đỗ Ngọc Hà. From a bulletin I received from Ms. Bùi, I contacted the Vietnamese Catholic Community in Berlin, and interviewed several members including the chairman Mr. Dương Văn Đá, both in their

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Phạm Văn Thanh had kindly arranged a ride for my fieldwork in Leipzig, but I was unable to pursue due to time shortage and health reasons. I did get to meet with Vietnamese living in Leipzig at Dr. Phạm’s home during a group gathering and discussion.

homes and at the Lent retreat at Canisius Kolleg. Through Mr. Dương's introduction, I met with and interviewed Vietnamese business owners in West Berlin. I contacted Father Lê Phan (Stefan Taeubner) several times by phone without success, but did get to talk to him at the retreat. During this visit, I met Dr. Nguyễn Văn Hương through Dr. Phạm, and interviewed him at his office at the Berlin's Bureau of Immigration and Integration. On the last day of my trip, after a group dinner at Dr. Phạm's, Mr. Phan surprised me with a two-session interview about my Berlin project in front of everyone. It was a challenging interview because I did not anticipate it, nor did I have the private space to think about the answers given the room full of attentive people.

The most significant event for me during my last fieldwork visit was the three-day Lent retreat "Tam Nhật Tĩnh Tâm" at Canisius Kolleg, that brought together—for the very first time—Vietnamese Catholics in both East and West Berlins. Though I first became aware of the North-South division through my conversation with Mr. Trường Sơn in March 2005, it was only until March 2008 that I witnessed this climax played out in a group setting at the retreat. While the priests, Father Lê Phan and Father Hà, intended to forge unity through this retreat, the distance between the two groups were obvious. The emotional and social distance expressed at the retreat helped me fathom what a former guest worker whose several family members were boat people told me in an interview the week before, "I go buy food at the [Vietnamese] markets [in East Berlin], but I never talk to anyone. I just make the purchase and leave."

One striking moment during the retreat was when I witnessed an elderly lady talk to a teenage boy who had just arrived in Berlin via underground migration networks. She said, “I was a boat person. I did not have any choice but to leave my homeland. It was painful. I lost everything. You don’t have to leave your parents like that. Do what is right: go to school, learn German, stay out of illegal acts. You are young. You have many opportunities.” Her words did not connect with the teenager, whose family had taken out a hefty loan to send him to Germany underground. He was there not to learn German and lead an exemplary life. He was there to make money right away to remit home to pay back the loans and support his family, even if it means to give himself to the black labor market in Berlin. He was there to ensure the economic survival of his entire family in Vietnam. The elderly lady spoke from her positionality, and saw in the teenager a criminal in the making, another mark of shame on her community. She neglected to see that this young man, while pursuing a condemned path by the German polity, does not enter Germany on the same terms she did.

In 2005, when I interviewed Mr. Phan, the director of Vietnam Haus and anchor for Radio Multikulti’s Vietnamese section, he told me that the Haus was closing. That is because the Berlin government has observed that after thirty-three years of integration into German society, Vietnamese in West Berlin no longer need the services that were originally intended for newly arrived refugees. Yet, in October 2008, I found a news article in *Labor (Lao Động)*, a Vietnam-based electronic newspaper, about the grand opening of a new Viethaus in East Berlin. Several conclusions

abound, but one immediate corollary is that the needs that were served in West Berlin thirty three years prior to 2008 are now being serviced to Vietnamese in East Berlin. This shows the diversity that is distinctly Berlin in comparison to other Vietnamese diasporic populations such as Orange County.

Here in Berlin, there are not only boat people as perceived in Little Saigon, but there are those I call “wall people” (climbing over the wall to enter West Berlin before the wall fell) and “woods people” (undocumented immigrants coming to Berlin through Eastern Europe, having to stay in car trunks or walk through the forest for days). And yet, Berlin is very much connected to Orange County because in the midst of those narratives about the last fifty years, the Vietnam War has not yet culminated as we witness the many exoduses that continue on long after the boat people phenomenon in the late 1970s through the early 1990s. At the same time, in Berlin, the Vietnamese diasporic immigration patterns are disrupted and diversified. Not only that there are refugees and established immigrants calling this city their home for over three decades, there are trafficked immigrants who have just arrived yesterday. The paradoxical aspects of Berlin as a site on its own and in relation to Orange County have enticed me to conceptualize Berlin as a comparative site. Nonetheless, while focusing on Germany and referencing the US, this project is in fact encompassing many other sites and integrating all the projects pertaining to the Vietnamese Diasporas that I have conducted. That is, in today’s global world, different locations are connected and mutually influential. The excerpted narratives in the

third section of this paper provide concrete illustrations of this interconnectedness.

These various encounters shed light on my enculturation into the Vietnamese life in Berlin. As an ethnographer, I am still learning what the different conversations mean and how they play out in the everyday life. As a bilingual oral historian, I listen to how the gaps in experiences and perspectives between Vietnamese in East and West Berlin lead to further distancing and oppositions that are rooted in the historical contexts of the homeland and host land. My ultimate goal is to explore how these texts and contexts can help the two communities build mutual trust, understanding, support, compassion, and respect.

### CONTEXTUALIZING THE VIETNAMESE BERLIN EXPERIENCES

While this paper focuses on Berlin, it is necessary to conceptualize how this site is directly linked to and affected by the Vietnamese diasporic experiences since 1975 at large and the Vietnam War context in particular. Additionally, it is important to see how Berlin's context—with the 1989 collapse of the Berlin wall and its lingering effects of division—enters the Vietnamese Berlin discourses. I am also wary of the current debates on fortress Europe, contemporary immigration, and inclusion/exclusion. These contexts and discourses are integral in my analysis of the concepts of refugee/immigrant, political legitimacy, legal rights and self-perceptions.

Following the 1975 Fall of Saigon, Vietnamese refugees primarily from South Vietnam arrived

in West Germany as boat people and subsequently through family reunification<sup>15</sup>, while Vietnamese guest workers<sup>16</sup> arrived in record-high numbers in the early 1980s in East Germany<sup>17</sup>. There were also Germans' spouses and Vietnamese adoptees in the West, as well as exchange students, undocumented immigrants, and entrepreneurs in the East. In West Germany, the government assigned Vietnamese boat people and their ethnic fellows to locations across the country as part of the integration policy, and provided them with language and vocational training<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, the GDR kept the Vietnamese guest workers in surveillance and isolation, with the intention of getting rid of them at the end of their contract<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Trangdai Glassey-Tranguyen. 2009. Bilingual Keynote. "Thuyền Nhân Việt Nam Toàn Cầu trong Thiên Niên Kỳ Thứ Ba: Tìm Lịch Sử, Giữ Tương Lai. Vietnamese Boat People in the Third Millennium: Seeking History, Growing Legacy." Year-long Project and Multidisciplinary Program: "Ra Khởi: Tưởng Niệm Thuyền Nhân Vượt Biển. Set Sail: Commemorating the Vietnamese Boat People." Gạch Nối Magazine Association, UC San Diego. Also, 2007. "The Stateless and the Nameless: Sovereignty in the Liberal World." 5th Annual Conference of Ethnic Studies at UCSD, "Ghosts, Monsters, and the Dead."

<sup>16</sup> I prefer the term "guest workers" over the term "contract workers" because the former conveys the sense of 'dis-belonging' as a guest, while the latter alludes to a contract—but this contract was not honored to the end.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis, Mike. "Working under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-89," *German Politics*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 2007, Pages 339 – 357.

<sup>18</sup> Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Phan Đăng Hiễn. Oral History Interview. March 11, 2008. Berlin, Germany.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis, Mike. "Working under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-89," *German Politics*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 2007, Pages 339 – 357.

Kept apart by the Berlin Wall, the two groups did not come into contact until the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, though there were Vietnamese trying to climb the wall to come to the West unsuccessfully<sup>20</sup>. Like Western Germans, Vietnamese in the West opened their homes and hearts to welcome their ethnic counterparts from the East when the Berlin Wall fell. However, the initial comity was short-lived, quickly challenged by the differences in political orientation and cultural expectations. Several Vietnamese women in West Berlin found their husbands being “taken over” by Vietnamese women from the East that they had taken in and helped<sup>21</sup>. I argue that this family disruption, which some narrators had described as “ingratitude” and “devil-doing,” was the impetus for the North-South opposition that manifests till today, two and a half decades later. Here in Berlin, the city’s historical East-West division is coupled with as well as superimposed on the Vietnamese immigrants’ North-South division, with the post-1989 geographical proximity augmenting the division to its climax.

Upon the loss of their contract caused by the demise of the Berlin Wall, Vietnamese guest workers were forced to return to Vietnam. The majority did leave. About 20,000 guest workers fought to stay, because they were used to the German life and did not wish to go back to Vietnam. Moreover, except for those connected to

<sup>20</sup> Field notes, March 2005 and 2008. Also, Trangdai Glassey-Tranguyen 2008. “Immigration in the Vietnamese Diasporas: 1975-2008,” Bilingual Keynote. Black April Commemoration, Colina Park, San Diego. VAYA Vietnamese American Youth Alliance.

<sup>21</sup> Field notes, March 2008.

the political elites in Vietnam, all guest workers and their families incurred great debt to acquire the work contract. Workers spent the first two years repaying the fees and interests, and could only start earning profit from the third year onward. If their contract ended prematurely, they were left with an exorbitant debt that they would not be able to repay if they returned to Vietnam<sup>22</sup>. To earn a living, some former guest workers engaged in contraband cigarette trade, a predominantly Polish network. To exacerbate the opposition between Vietnamese in the East and the West, the German media portrayed the Vietnamese former guest workers and new undocumented immigrants as criminals and brought an ethnic stigma upon the Vietnamese population in general<sup>23</sup>. This ethnic stigma and public shame caused not only the Vietnamese in the West to dis-associate with their counterparts in the East, but even Vietnamese in the East felt the same way.

In the Berlin government's brochure (1986, 1990, and 1997) on migration and integration, the City's Commissioner Barbara John uses the Vietnamese boat people as model examples against the unwanted criminalized Vietnamese former guest workers<sup>24</sup>. As the spokesperson for the Berlin Office of Foreigners' Affairs, John has the power to influence public opinion about

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<sup>22</sup> Dennis, Mike. "Working under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-89," *German Politics*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 2007, Pages 339 – 357.

<sup>23</sup> Chase-Jacobson, Jordan. "Vietnamese in Berlin." Internal Report, Berlin's Bureau of Immigration and Integration. 2003. Provided by Chase-Jacobson's Supervisor, Nguyễn Văn Hương, J.D., in 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

non-Germans living in the Federal Republic. John's tone of voice, her sense of guiding Germany and its people in dealing with foreigners, and her differentiation between herself and the immigrants show her orientation on the matter. She starts by stating the interconnections between the history of Berlin and that of the Vietnamese immigrants, contextualizing the latter in the German East-West struggle. I argue that the act of fixing the Vietnamese immigrant discourse onto the German history shows the meta-narrative that persists on a German-centric perspective, and excludes the voices of the Vietnamese immigrants by "speaking for them." This is where I believe my project will make an important intervention. With a focus on the narratives and perspectives of the Vietnamese immigrants on both sides of the once-divided Berlin, I am foregrounding the Vietnamese language and experiences in an attempt to study the subject formation of the Vietnamese in both the East and the West. This focus also illuminates the squatting metaphor that I build from Simon Leung's project. The boat people set the first foot down in the West, and the contract workers set the second foot down in the East. The two groups come into the squatting position with the presence of the other group, unlike the exclusionary analysis found in the Berlin brochure. The boat people are no longer used to exclude the contract workers, as they were in the brochure.

In his internal report as an intern at the Berlin Bureau for Immigration and Integration<sup>25</sup>, Chase-Jacobson observes that John does not dwell on the history of the boat people, though she does give the contours of their experiences from arrival to what she calls “an example of successful integration” (pg 8). She notes the many self-help Vietnamese groups, suggesting that the Vietnamese boat people have fully integrated into Berlin society. This partially explains the closing of Vietnam Haus in 2005. At the same time, new ethnic-based agencies and organizations continue to emerge in East Berlin around this time, but this emergence might have escaped John’s notice because it does not serve the purpose of her argument.

I am wary of how convenient it is for the government of Berlin to use the contexts of the two Vietnamese groups to narrate the meta-narrative of division. Since the Vietnamese guest workers came on a contract basis, they were never considered for integration. These disposable bodies—members of the global assembly line—were supposed to provide short-term labor and return to their country of origin. I ask: does the East German government work, and if so—how—to help the former guest workers adjust and cope with reverse culture shock when they return to Vietnam? At the time of the brochure, the status of the former guest workers who chose to remain in Germany was still uncertain. More than a decade later, that is still the

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<sup>25</sup> I thank Dr. Nguyễn Văn Hương for providing me with a copy of Chasse-Jacobson’s report after my oral history interview with him in March 2008.

case. Nonetheless, John's attention is selectively on the refused asylum seekers and the alleged Vietnamese cigarette sellers, not on the former guest workers who have earned their rights to stay in Germany with hard work and perseverance.

I find this distinction disturbing and ambiguous. Such a distinction erases the fact that many refused asylum seekers were also former guest workers, several of whom applied multiple times for asylum in Germany after they lost their contracted work. The demonstrations and marches of the former guest workers after the *Wende* show that they were as much asylum seekers as anyone else who might have come to Germany undocumented<sup>26</sup>. While John states that the Berlin brochure offers a “differentiated perspective of the Vietnamese Berliners,” this differentiation betrays the diverse yet interconnected realities that Vietnamese in Berlin share, whether they have come by boat or via a work visa. According to Chase-Jacobson, “the motivation of Barbara John and the authors of the pamphlet is to isolate the perpetrators of violent trade from the rest of the Vietnamese population in order to *diminish ethnic-stigmatization*” (italics mine, pg 10). Yet, contrary to the authors, the pamphlet in fact can only cause more disruption and division within the Vietnamese immigrant communities, exacerbating

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<sup>26</sup> Glassey-Trànguyễn, Trangđài & Nguyễn Sơn Thạch. Oral History Interview. March 19, 2008. Berlin, Germany. During this interview, I also accessed the extensive archive of photos and newspaper clippings of the guest workers' marches and struggles for the right to stay at the office of Hội Phục Vụ Láng Giềng.

the double-division East-West North-South praxis.

The meta-narrative of the Berlin government, through Barbara John as the official spokesperson, reflects a dichotomy-perspective about immigrants: the good/wanted/legal versus the bad/unwanted/illegal. By “legitimizing” the good and condemning the “bad,” Barbara John has denied the unwanted immigrants of their “right to a city” as Henri Lefebvre<sup>27</sup> describes,

The right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city.

This de/legitimizing of the boat people and the guest workers fails to account for East Germany’s interest in and benefits from the guest workers. This act also fails to account for the detrimental disruption in the guest workers’ life and their contracts upon the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Their de-legitimization renders the guest workers “illegal,” while their entry into East Germany was legal and wanted—and wanted urgently. By ‘isolating’ them as the problematic segment of the Vietnamese immigrant collective in Berlin, Barbara John fails to acknowledge the role of the Berlin government in addressing post-*Wende* issues for the populations already marginalized prior to 1989. While the guest workers were marginalized through surveillance, isolation, and

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<sup>27</sup> Lefebvre, Henri (trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas). *Writings on Cities*, Blackwell Publishing, 1996.

harsh regulations during their contract work, they continued to be treated as “illegitimate” after they unfairly lost their contract beyond their control or desire. As workers, they benefited both the East German and Vietnamese governments, with direct labor that sustained an economy in labor crisis, and direct withdrawals from their salaries respectively<sup>28</sup>. Yet neither government took responsibility to address their needs and rights upon the fall of the Berlin Wall. The guest workers, therefore, are doubly marginalized before (by Vietnam and East Germany) and triply marginalized (as well as by West/United Germany) after the *Wende*.

As such, the Berlin brochure dehumanizes the guest workers, while fitting the boat people into the humanitarian positivistic mold that purports German values and success. By amputating the guest workers from the Vietnamese immigrant body of Berlin, John illustrates what Stuart Hall calls the “internalist narrative” that excludes non-Germans<sup>29</sup>. The de-legitimization of the guest workers also acts as a double negation of their part in the most recent period of German history, and can be very well part of the longitudinal negation of non-European bodies in Germany since medieval times<sup>30</sup>. Here, the Berlin brochure absconds the guest workers’ autonomy and agency, speaking for them (i.e. on their behalf) and against them. In this process of denying the guest workers a voice and a place in German society, the

<sup>28</sup> Dennis, Mike. “Working under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-89,” *German Politics*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 2007, Pages 339 – 357.

<sup>29</sup> Cited by El-Tayeb, Fatima. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Difference Incorporated). University of Minnesota Press. 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

brochure has racialized them as “others” and outside of the German polity. The brochure continues the work of the exclusionary history deep-rooted in Europe’s past that Fatima El-Tayeb has describes in her works (2004, 2008, 2011).

Furthermore, Barbara John separates the Vietnamese immigrants in four categories: students, boat people, contract workers, and refused asylum seekers. This separation further illustrates the negation of the connectedness and relatedness of members of this ethnic group. By condemning the last group, John fails to acknowledge the historical context of division that leads to the immigration of Vietnamese on both sides of the Berlin Wall. John leaves her own point of departure hanging when she fails to acknowledge that all four groups of Vietnamese came to Germany as a result of the Cold War aftermath, the very root of the German East-West division which she uses as the premise of her argument. Additionally, the model-minority myth and “yellow trash” work hand in hand, at once elevating some and debasing others of the same ethnicity.

Barbara John uses the term “boat people” and evokes the historical period of the late 1970s and 1980s when Vietnamese war refugees poured into the Pacific Ocean in search of freedom. The donation and creation of the rescue ship *Cap Anamur*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> At the plight of the Vietnamese boat people drowning in the high sea in the late 1970s, concerned West Germans donated money to build the ship named *Cap Anamur* to rescue the Vietnamese escapees. This was one of several worldwide efforts to rescue the boat people. *Cap Anamur* operated as an NGO helping the Vietnamese boat people during its genesis, and has continued to be an international organization committed to assisting those living in developing countries with medical aid, healthcare, building hospitals and schools, and providing relief materials to communities in crisis. Dr. Ruppert Neudeck (1939-2016) of

conjures an important and proud moment in West Germany's history of immigration and integration. At the plight of the Vietnamese boat people, concerned Germans were able to act out their humanitarian deeds. The Vietnamese boat people have expressed their gratitude in a multitude of ways, including raising funds to erect commemorative monuments in honor of the rescuers and Germany<sup>32</sup>. The *Wende* brings a new light for the boat people, who were not previously viewed as a success. Yet in contrast to their counterparts in the East post-*Wende*, the boat people were seen in much brighter light than they have ever been—when the boat people narrative was used to make a case against the guest workers and argue for social and political exclusion of the latter.

Pipo Bui<sup>33</sup> points out the significant changes in the brochure over its three consecutive editions in 1986, 1990, and 1997. The Vietnam War becomes less important in the latter editions. The criticism of Vietnamese socialist government decreases. The Vietnamese immigrants in the West are perceived as more successfully integrated than their recent counterparts. These changes are used to differentiate the two groups, and widen the existing divisions between them. Bui also notes that:

In the early part of the decade, Vietnamese migrants barely surfaced in the national

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Troisdorf was the founder of the Cap Anamur project. See [www.cap-anamur.org](http://www.cap-anamur.org)

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Radio Free Asia. “Khánh thành Bia tỵ nạn tưởng niệm thuyền nhân ở nước Đức” (Vietnamese Boat People Commemorative Monument in Germany) by Minh Thuỳ, May 1, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Bui, Pipo. *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany: Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narratives and Partial Masking*. LIT Verlag Münster, 2003.

press. This is surprising, because in the interval between 1991 and 1996, Vietnamese were implicated a couple of items of national news and political interest, including the wave of racist violence in 1992 (as victims) and the 1993 right-to-stay policy for people who had been brought to the GDR as laborers as agents in the political process.

I wonder what it takes for the Vietnamese, especially those in the East, to go from “migrants” to “vagrants,” from illegal to criminal. As El-Tayeb<sup>34</sup> points out, non-European bodies have always been considered outside of the Republic polity, and as such, have always been ‘vagrant’ in all senses. How does the process of “de-legitimization” such as the one found in the Berlin brochure create an excluded community, in Simon Leung’s vein of community as processual that I will explore in the next section? The 1992 Rostock incident<sup>35</sup> renders Vietnamese as victims, but they are still in the background of right-wing politics and xenophobic violence in the face of limited police and government responses. Nonetheless, the image of background victims was soon replaced by that of contraband cigarette sellers and gangsters only three years later.

When I revisited my Berlin field notes several years after the day I met a Vietnamese family in the refugee camp there in March 2005, the image of a little boy dominated my mind. He was barely three years old, circling the room that had minimal furniture and a “playground” with discarded

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<sup>34</sup> El-Tayeb, Fatima. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Difference Incorporated). University of Minnesota Press. 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Kinzer, Stephen. “Vietnamese, Easy Target, Fear Outster by Germany.” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1992.

toys. He was carefree and spirited. Yet his presence and energy disturbed his bipolar father, Lê Thăng Lợi, who described himself as having turned lunatic after hiding from the police raids so many times and for so many months. I ask: how does this child, barely three years old, figure into the Vietnamese immigration reality and German geo-politics? How does he enter the Vietnamese diasporic communities in Germany and to be more particular, the Vietnamese communities in Berlin? Is he counted? What category does he fit in, if at all? He certainly did not fit in at home—his playful zest angered his father. But to a total stranger like myself on the very first visit to their shelter, the boy's childhood of being in limbo hit home for me. He was with his father, who at times didn't want him. There were also moments when the boy was separated from his parents and siblings, in a strategy to delay the police arrest and immediate deportation. The German government must deport the whole family and not its minor members on their own, hence self-identified stateless refugees like his father would split up the family in order to divert the police actions.

Where does this child fit into the East-West Berlin division, and the North-South climactic oppositions between the two Vietnamese Berlins? Mr. Trường Sơn's words stayed with me across the years, and prompted me to particularly heed the psychological and physical divisions that run deep amongst Vietnamese communities in Berlin during my studies there. The man only spoke of division stemming from the 1954 Rivervine Division in Vietnam, but I have found other lines of division beyond the demarcation zone that once split Vietnam in halves six decades ago. There used to

be two Berlins, but there are still two Vietnamese Berlins. Several scholars have recognized the divisive effects of the wall that linger on long after its 1989 demise. Yet I argue that the wall is very much standing for the Vietnamese populations in Berlin. As a West-Berlin Vietnamese told me, even when she went to East Berlin to procure ethnic Vietnamese food, which the Vietnamese there have recently made diversified and abundant, she never talked to anyone. She simply came for the food.

There are divergences in the way immigrant and refugee Vietnamese came to Berlin, and historical underpinnings in both their homeland Vietnam and the host country Germany have contributed to the contemporary divisions and differences. I argue that together with the Vietnamese immigration trajectories, German integration and im/migration policies have shaped the conditions and developments of the two Vietnamese communities in Berlin. I argue that supportive programs at arrival, legal equity, integration opportunities, and other factors have helped Vietnamese in West Berlin participate better in the German society. To reduce the crime rates amongst Vietnamese in East Berlin and to advance their future in the German society as a whole, Vietnamese immigrants in East Berlin should be treated under similar policies that their counterparts in West Berlin have enjoyed since 1975.

## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF VIETNAMESE BERLINS: CONTEMPORARY INTEGRATION

In the mixing of today's world, it is almost impossible to remain "isolated" in any given context, more so in a cosmopolitan space like Berlin. Yet it

is shown that several walls are still standing between the two Vietnamese Berlin communities. I argue that the moment of encounter has taken place, and while clashes and oppositions will continue to drive the interactions, a new sense of understanding and fellowship will emerge if the Vietnamese in East Berlin can attain political equity, legal rights, and social inclusion. The East Berlin Vietnamese have been seen in a negative light by their own ethnic counterparts and the local communities. Their immigration experiences are frowned upon, and their economic and moral practices are not endorsed by the West Berlin Vietnamese. Nonetheless, oppositions must make way for collaborations, and mutual interest will lead to a more open and inclusive dialog.

When I was in Berlin in March 2008, the city court processed the case of a florist who trusted her two infants in the care of a babysitter. The babysitter left the kids at home to go buy yogurt, and one of the two young infants fell from the balcony and died. Such heart-wrenching incident is not rare—cases of domestic mismanagements and/or filial dysfunction amongst Vietnamese in East Berlin often make it into the German media. I ask: what does it take for the Vietnamese in the East to be able to sustain their life better? Legal rights and political equity are the impetus for any improvement in the lives of this community.

Here, I want to take into consideration the social costs endured by the East Berlin Vietnamese—the burden of separation with their immediate family in Vietnam, the challenge to perform Western economic gains, and the oddity of being at the bottom of a labor ladder in one society yet delivering at the higher end of a living survival in yet another society. They experience the absence

of a family in Berlin in order to help maintain a family in Vietnam. Many young Vietnamese teens arriving in Berlin today do not come for any other purposes rather than to remit the Euros home. The contradiction of the global currencies—the US dollar and the Euro—works against these worker immigrants.

### EXCERPTED IMMIGRATION NARRATIVES

The following excerpted narratives are gleaned from hours-long oral history interviews with Vietnamese in Berlin, Warsaw, and Malmö. They show the various ways in which Vietnamese (im)migrants come to (and through) Germany, and that immigration is multi-directional rather than linear as often perceived. These narratives complicate the discourses of Vietnamese in Germany, and challenge the binary division found in the Berlin brochure.

As is true for all my projects on the Vietnamese diasporas<sup>36</sup>, these interviews were biographical instead of topic-oriented, allowing the narrators to

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<sup>36</sup> In the 1990s, I started the Vietnamese Diasporas Project (VDP), which uses oral history interviews and community participation to document the experiences and perspectives of Vietnamese populations around the world. The first component of the VDP was the Vietnamese American Project, the first and only of its kind to simultaneously conduct ongoing fieldwork alongside community participation, and to gather extensive oral histories of Vietnamese living in Orange County, CA, USA, which is home to the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam. In 2004, I started the Vietnamese Stockholm Project under the auspice of an exceptional-ranking Fulbright full-grant. In 2004-05, while a Fulbrighter, I initiated the Vietnamese Berlin Project and the Vietnamese Warsaw Project as components of the Vietnamese European Project. In 2005, through a doctoral fellowship at Stanford University, I started the Vietnamese Taiwan Project to study the trafficking of Vietnamese women through marriage brokerage.

express themselves freely and fully<sup>37</sup>. I conducted all interviews in Vietnamese, transcribed, and translated them into English. Each transcript is between sixty to one hundred pages. For the purpose of this paper, I extracted the contours that are most relevant to each narrator's immigration history. I recognize the violence in stripping the narratives of their larger contexts and the more nuanced recollections that are omitted. I trust that by acknowledging this risk expressly, I prompt the readers to be more attentive to the details in these excerpted narratives and to keep in mind the larger contexts behind these contours.

I have selected four distinct oral history interviews among the one-hundred plus from my projects on the Vietnamese in Europe for this section, with narrators originating from the North, the Central region, and the South. Only the excerpted narratives for each interview are included here owing to the space constraint. However, the contours of each person's narratives all address themes pertaining to wars, family separation, migration history, adjustment in the new country, and aspirations for the future. These narratives reflect both similarities and differences of how life was for Vietnamese in the three parts of Vietnam during and after the Vietnam War, and their diverse migration trajectories to Germany (and Europe).

Of the four, I would like to privilege the excerpted narratives of Phan Hiễn Mạnh conducted in Sweden. Coming to Vietnamese (East) Berlin was a way for me to enter pre-1975 Northern Vietnam and to encounter the unfamiliar narratives of

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<sup>37</sup> For further details on my approach in oral history methodology, see Tranguyen 2004 and Glassey-Tranguyen 2008.

diasporic Vietnamese coming from the North after 1975. Phan Hiến Mạnh's narratives not only open the portals to how life was in the North in the 1960s-1980s, but also reveal the paths through which Vietnamese bodies have passed in Eastern Europe. His narratives are rich with emotions, complex with multi-directional movements, and powerful with articulations of diasporic subjectivity. His experiences encompass so many facets of Vietnam's modern history and how its people have negotiated with the disruptions in their country's recent past. His recorded stories started with wartime, and remained a search for peace, even though he has lived for several years in the land of 200 years of unbroken peace called Sweden.

It is important to note that Phan Hiến Mạnh's narratives encompass the multiple trajectories that illuminate the experiences of stateless Vietnamese in Europe, and express so profoundly the North-South division in his family across generations, both at home in Vietnam and in the diasporas. His articulation of the difficult instability in the life of a stateless Vietnamese in Berlin and Germany chimes with Lê Thăng Lợi's stories, as well as confirming the challenges facing trafficked Vietnamese migrants in Eastern Europe. Phan Hiến Mạnh, like Lê Thăng Lợi, repeats certain aspects of his experiences with intense emotions that might not be so obvious in a text. I am working on a documentary using video footages of these interviews and my fieldwork in Europe to convey the narrator's immediacy through the screen.

Phan Hiến Mạnh's narratives are also significant in how they point out the North-North division, complicating the familiar North-South bi-

nary. While in Vietnam, Phan enjoyed the privileges that his parents had earned through their participation in the Communist army in the North, and as a result, he was able to come to the Czech Republic as an exchange student. When Phan eventually got to Sweden, he realized that despite all of his struggles, he was not treated equally as his fellow Northern Vietnamese, who had escaped by boat to Sweden and who might have been less privileged than Phan in Northern Vietnam. This is where Vietnamese immigrants from the North wished they were received and admitted as refugees like their counterparts from Southern Vietnam. Here, the boat people and the stateless Vietnamese immigrants—all hailed from the North—switched role, occupying a space I call borderland-motherland. In this space, they are simultaneously outside of Vietnam and still very much in it.

I find it violent to extract excerpts from any of the biographical oral history interviews I have conducted across the Vietnamese diasporas around the world, because those hours-long interviews were already a stifling reduction of the narrator's experiences. I face even greater challenges with Phan Hiễn Mạnh's narratives because of their richness, interconnectedness, and complexity. Nonetheless, given the interest of space and theme, I have gleaned the passages that are most relevant to this entry and pertain to immigration, Vietnamese history, and diasporic subjectivity. As we traverse the excerpted narratives, we can see that not only are the Vietnamese squatting in Berlin, but other parts of Europe and the world over.

**A. FATHER VÕ THÀNH KHÁNH, WARSAW, POLAND**

Roaming the stadium helped me understand the Vietnamese' lives here: the suffering, the difficulties, and the depths of their pain.

They invite me over after work and serve a six-course meal. It feels like a party. Food is much more affordable here than in Vietnam.

The undocumented refugees face the everyday threat of being imprisoned, interrogated by the police, and pushed around. Such pressure prompts them to bond and extend their love to each other.

I listen to their stories, and receive their pain. I was not sure how to process all of that. They let me touch the deepest corners of their lives.

Around seven to eight thousand Vietnamese work at the stadium. They suffer a great deal. They are emotionally deprived because their families live in Vietnam.

They always call me for help. Even when I can't help them, I still come to be with them.

Their primary challenge is the dismantling of the families they have in Vietnam. They came here as single individuals, and just pair up. Women look for men for support.

For some, their wives and husbands in Vietnam are unfaithful. They endure all the hardship and the separation from the family, but the hard money they earned is wasted.

Because of their il/legal status, they often get arrested, strip-searched, abused and harassed.

Everyone keeps fifty or a hundred Zloty as their “passport.” They would be lucky to go free if the police search them and take the cash. Otherwise, the police take the money and send the illegal immigrants to the refuge camp for deportation.

I often visit the prisons to talk to them, and help them make phone calls to the outside world. My cell phone enables their families to connect with them and to provide them with basic necessities. I have to cheer them up, reminding the prisoners that they are the hope of their family.

Very few know Polish that well, only about five percent are fluent. Those are the exchange students who stayed behind after graduation. They lead a much easier life than the rest.

The Vietnamese undocumented immigrants do not have a social life. They cannot even take a walk. The poorest in Poland could always take a walk. But the Vietnamese immigrants would be so afraid to walk outside of their homes.

The immigrants live in a Vietnamese cultural food environment, with many ethnic restaurants and grocery stores. Food is transferred on five daily flights between Vietnam and Poland. The flights go through different routes, such as Paris, part of the Asian food chains.

Fifty to one hundred Vietnamese come to Poland illegally everyday. They fly from Vietnam to Moscow, and stay in car trunks from Moscow to Ukraine. They go through the for-

est 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 trafficking 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 trying again once released. Some try for an entire year.

Trafficked men face less 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 to send more money.

The trafficked 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. Word gets out. People are frightened when they go through those sites.

The trafficked people are afraid of many things. They are afraid of the police. They are afraid of the traffickers. They are afraid that they can't pay the extra fee." (End of excerpted narrative.)

**B. LÊ THẮNG LỢI, BERLIN, GERMANY**

I was born in 1974 in Hanoi. Life was difficult, from the everyday conditions to issues such as freedom of speech. Albeit the great injustice, we had to accept it or else risked persecution.

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 the Vietnamese constitution, the government said that freedom of religion is granted but it is the opposite in reality.

In 1996, we had our first child. I planned to escape again because of harassment from the local authority. We split up and hid. Our first-born soon asked, "Where is Daddy?" My wife could not tell my daughter where I was.

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. The German government asked us where we had been. I said that we went back to Vietnam. But they did not believe us.

No one left with efficient luggage. We did not have the right documentation. Each family quickly escapes, running away from the Vietnamese government.

If you succeed, you are very lucky. An escape is a matter of life and death, but you escape

regardless. We only hope to have a decent life.

After my second arrival in Germany, I joined groups demonstrating against the Vietnamese government. On October 10, 2001, I attacked the Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải, who came to Germany to urge our repatriation.

We tried to bring awareness to the German public that if they want to invest in a country, such country should be politically established and stable. If you invest in an unstable government like Vietnam, you are giving money to a robber.

The Vietnamese government is a mafia with a Communist label. They claim to serve the people, but in fact the common people suffer a great deal.

The worst came, and we left. But what about those who could not afford to escape? This is our people's greatest dilemma. If we keep leaving Vietnam, what will become of it?

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 40x7 meters. My only friend was the watch. My only food was instant 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 hidden 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 was confronted with three months without food.

I had to rely on my wife and children's aids. For three months, I left during the day and I could only come back to sleep during the night. The police and government had pushed us to our dead end.

Because of my mental disorder, I had requested a quiet facility but was turned down. This room is very small and it echoes. My children are small, and their noise disturbs me. When the children play and shout, it gives me migraines.

I want to work, but am not allowed. I do not want to be burden to the German society. Had it not been for my wife and my children, to live like this is suicide for me.

There's no return for me in Vietnam. But to stay here is barely an option. The door to freedom has shut closed.

I am the father of three children and a husband. I must do my part regardless of the suffering. If I collapse, my wife and children will be in trouble.

During my six years in Germany, the government had turned me from a healthy young

man to a sick person. The German political system is a complete legal system. Once it pushes the Vietnamese refugees out, we have no way to go.

I am one of the strong activist voices in this community. I had stood in front of the Vietnamese embassy in Berlin and burned the Vietnamese flag. In Vietnam, I would have been sentenced to death. But it's the free world here in Germany. Therefore, they do not understand the price that dissidents pay in Vietnam.

In this so-called Free World, they do not understand how it is like in unfree places. When a person from an oppressive society talks to someone from a free society, they do not understand each other. Neither of them understands the other. (End of excerpted narratives)

### C. PHAN HIỂN MẠNH

...I was born in 1964 into a worker family. It was wartime. My family lived on the campus of the Economy and Chemistry University in Thừa Sơn, Bắc Ninh. Since the time that I was born, I lived in Vietnam. In 1982, after I graduated from high school in Vietnam, I left for the Czech Republic.

We were impoverished. We were poor to the extent that my father had to take a loan for me to go to school. The awareness and consciousness that you had to help your parents was very clear.

My parents were very hardworking and they dedicated their lives to us their children. That was my most astounding impression. It is also

my lasting impression of Vietnam, the parents' love for their children. Although I have left Vietnam since 1982, it has been twenty-two years, but that love has never faded in me.

There were occasions to meet with my extended family in the countryside. My father's older sister and younger brother left for the South in 1954. For those individuals, I have never met them until today, even so with my cousins. I do know that some of them live in America, but I have no way of contacting them or tracing them.

When I left Vietnam in 1982, my father's older sister did come back to visit from America, and she did come back for a few times, and after that, they lost touch. My father lived under the Communist regime, but his older sister had already left in 1954, so maybe they do not see eye to eye on certain things. In spite of that, they still visit each other and go to the countryside together in order to commemorate the ancestors, or they would come back to pay homage at the family commemoration houses.

My father had joined the Vietnamese Communist Guerrilla [Army] before. He said that after many years in the Guerrillas, there wasn't anything special there. So he was hoping that his children would become educated and have a better life, to improve their life and to have something better than their parents.

I arrived in the Czech Republic in October of the year 1982. I was almost 18 years old when I left. I was very sad when I left my family.

When my mother took me to the airport to go to the Czech Republic, I was still crying very hard. From the time I was born until that time, I never left my family and I never traveled away from my family for over two hundred kilometers.

When we first arrived, we started with language training. Later on we started vocational training and focused more on technology. I was trained from 1982 to 1986. Since I was younger, I had the advantage of acquiring and mastering language skills faster than my seniors in the delegation.

Back then in 1989, Vietnam sent quite many students to the Czech Republic, and they also sent exchange workers. Vietnam sent exchange workers to work at factories and manufacturers. Those exchange workers ran into several different problems. They only got to have language training for three months. After that, they had to work continuously. After I graduated from the program, I applied to work as an interpreter for the Vietnamese in the Czech Republic who had difficulties with the Czech language in the city that I lived in.

I remember arriving in the Czech Republic in the morning. It was very cold and it was October. Their airport was huge and ours was just very tiny, and we only had old airplanes. When I was in Prague, their airport was huge. So I was surprised and I said, "Wow, how come their country is so beautiful?" During the time that I lived in Vietnam, there was no information flow, especially in the North.

When we arrived, even the Czech people were very friendly and helpful. Everything was different. So I was thinking, "Wow, that

was my chance to change my star.” We received the same benefits as other local students. The school provided everything and we only focused on studying. Although I had a scholarship, it wasn’t enough. Many times I wanted to send something home, but I wasn’t able to and that made me very sad.

But I do have to say that the time that I went to school there was a lot of fun. For instance, we went to school in the morning and in the afternoon, we played sports together. There were people of my age and we were of different ethnicities. That diversity really excited me at that time.

I worked as an interpreter until 1989, having lived in the Czech Republic for 7 years. That’s when changes started to take place in the Eastern European countries in political structures and regimes. It started out in Germany and then in the Czech Republic, in Poland, in Hungary, then my perception started to shift. Back then, information about the West was very scarce, but in 1989, I started to see things clearly.

I was prompted to leave and I became curious about other places. I was not pushed around or oppressed in any way in the Czech Republic, but I only wanted to pursue what deemed better.

After 1990, I also followed my friends. After I finished my studies, I did go back to Vietnam once in 1986 and again in 1990. People often say that after a period of time living and studying abroad, you will change a lot, but I didn’t see that much change in me, not in me. I did not see much change in Vietnam during that time.

In 1990, I would like to stay with my parents as much as possible, but I had to earn my living so I came back to the Czech Republic to continue working as an interpreter. Of course, when I talked with my friends in 1989, I already had that idea of leaving my family for good.

I met my current wife when we were on the plane in 1990. So we started dating then. In 1990, there was an ordinance from the embassy that forced us to come back to Vietnam. So I thought, well, I have heard about life elsewhere. It would be a pity if I did not get to see what it's really like. So I decided to go to Germany. At first, I went to East Germany and I saw a friend. There, some Vietnamese had established small businesses and I already started to see that life was much better than what it was in the Czech Republic or in Vietnam. Of course, everything was strange to me and I was a new fish in a strange pond, but because I had heard stories from friends before, I remained curious and continued to explore. Then I went to West Germany and, wow, they had changed so much. So I looked between East and West Germany and I saw huge differences, not to mention Vietnam. It was very different in West Germany. How could that be?

At that time, I decided not to come back to Vietnam or to return to the Czech Republic. I decided to disobey the ordinance from the Vietnamese embassy. So I remember that in 1990 after I met with a friend in East Germany, he said that I should stay with him if I did not wish to return to Vietnam. He said that we could stay together and collaborate to earn a living.

At first, we also ran a small business like any other Vietnamese, but I was more fortunate than the rest because I spoke Slovakian. There were many Poles coming to Germany for trades. So it was fortunate that there were many Poles coming to West Germany and I was able to connect different niches and developed my marketing network. So I, of course, could communicate much more efficiently with the Polish business people than the Vietnamese in Germany. Of all the goods and merchandises that they had, I was able to acquire them.

So I started to establish a small business for myself. I worked together with my friend, and we purchased a car. I'm not sure why I was that adventurous at that time. I did not have any kind of legal documentation, and to buy a car like that was very risky. And, in my mind, I thought that in Western European countries, even when they caught you, they would not abuse you physically like in Eastern European countries. It was a thought that I had in mind and I kept believing in it. And because of that very simple belief, I was convinced to stay in Germany.

Although I had my business, I kept sneaking back and forth through the border, because for all the time that I lived in the Czech Republic, there were many memories. Those memories still remain fresh in me. I would never be able to forget them. And although at that time in Germany I was a stateless person, I kept going back and forth between the two countries to visit my girlfriend.

When I first came to Germany, I had thought that if the police were to arrest me, they wouldn't beat me up. Of course it was very

difficult. Quite frankly, at that time, the retail business like that was rather normal. We worked out the paperwork together. I had no other choice. I wanted to leave the Czech Republic. I had no choice, so of course I was worried, but I couldn't do anything else. Although through my friend, I was able to acquire some kind of document, but it was all an illusion. It was only something to hold on to.

After a time, I realized that such a life was not stable. I then ran into a friend who also worked in the translation services with me in the Czech Republic. He was the one who later on came to Sweden with me. He had family members in Sweden, so he came to me and said, "Listen, why don't we go to Sweden?" We had known each other through the time in the Czech Republic, and we were very close. So I decided, "All right, let us go to Sweden." Through visual images of Sweden, I felt that the country was very peaceful, very beautiful. I looked at the houses and they looked very peaceful and quiet.

The time that I was running a small business with my friend in Germany was extremely chaotic. That was not my purpose for living. That was not my purpose in life. I did not see a bright future in that particular living condition.

At that time, I did not think that there was any future in coming back to Vietnam. All my siblings advised me to return to Vietnam. My parents requested that I return home, but because I had gone on and seen a different country... So for me to come back, I thought I could not get used to the lifestyle there during the times I visited.

Therefore, I decided to go to Germany, and it was only because I connected with a friend that I stayed and collaborated with him in the business. But at that time, I did not establish a clear direction for my life. I did not have a clear purpose in life like I do right now living in Sweden. So after a time running that business, life became too chaotic. Of course we had to work for survival.

I remember that very night. I just sat down and smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, and my girlfriend at that time wondered why I was smoking so much. I needed to decide whether I would leave Germany to go live in Sweden. The next morning I told my friend that I decided to go to Sweden. I decided so only because through the postcards and pictures I found that life in Sweden was very peaceful. Up to that point, I had followed the news, and I gathered some information. I learned that Sweden, for a long time, did not have any wars, and I looked at the houses on the mountain and they were beautiful.

Life in Sweden seemed very carefree. I didn't think that I would have to work as much as I do now. So after a long night, without sleeping, the same way when I was little and my father promised to bring me to Hà Nội, I would not sleep... Of course that night I was much stronger, and I decided the next morning... So we purchased documents. We bought visas because we were to cross the borders.

As soon as I set foot on the Swedish soil, I confirmed my impression that this is a very peaceful place and the people are really gentle. They are very calm. So immediately, I felt a great connection with the people and the place. We had the people who have lived here

before help take us to the refugee camps for those who would like to seek refuge in Sweden.

After a few months in the refugee camp, I asked a few friends in Germany to help bring my girlfriend to Sweden. When she got here, we both lived in the refugee camp. My wife gave birth to my first daughter in 1993. I remember the night that my wife went into labor. I took her. It was in the middle of the night. They called a Slovakian-speaking interpreter because I spoke the language of the Czech Republic. There were no Vietnamese interpreters at the time.

All the way until 1997, Sweden issued a humanitarian policy for refugees to let those who had come to Sweden by 1995 and have had children stay in Sweden. We were very fortunate that we met the requirements. But because of my legal documents in the Czech Republic, they did not let us enter Sweden right away.

My family lived in the refugee camp for seven years. At that time, I already had my own family, and I had decided for myself that we would live in Sweden, and I did not want to go anywhere else. It was a final decision. Everyone in the refugee camp was approved to stay in Sweden, but we kept waiting.

There was a time that my paperwork was so messed up and even if I recount my situation, I do not think that people could imagine such complications. So when my documents did not go through, I did all kinds of odd jobs. I worked on the farm, I picked berries.

I did anything I could to earn a living. I had some complications with the paperwork, so my wife and my children remained in the refugee camp. For me, I had to leave the refugee camp for instance, so that the police would not catch me. I was afraid that they would remove me from Sweden, but now that I think about it, I do not think that they would send me anywhere because I was a stateless person.

In 1998, we received the approval. And we were allowed to remain in Sweden as refugees forever. During the time I lived in the refugee camp, I looked at the families living in Sweden and I thought eventually one day my family would have a life like that.

My hope was very high. I never anticipated that I would experience a period of chaos and suffering. In Vietnam, we would say it was the time when you started another cycle of your zodiac reading. It was horrible, it was a very bad time. And now that I have gone through that state, I am very appreciative of whatever I have.

There is a price for everything. There are refugees who were received by the Swedish government all the way from the Hong Kong refugee camps. They felt that it was a breeze, and they took it easy. These individuals found that it was too easy to go to Sweden, so they have lived in this country for decades and they still rely on social benefits.

I was told to learn Swedish first, then I could find a job. When I was hiding from the police here in Sweden, I had taken so many jobs, and I had gained so many experiences.

I came to the job placement office and said I would like to start working, but they did not allow me. But I kept coming back, and there was one time that I got helped by this very friendly person, who said, "You're right. If you could do that, then why not?"

I was in the middle of the language training program, and I quit. I already learned a lot of Swedish in the refugee camp and I also taught myself. I even helped translate for those who had lived in Sweden for more than a decade.

Even though it could be easy to take government handouts, I hated coming to the welfare office every month and file the paperwork. I think it's rather disgusting and boring.

It was six years ago. I received my approval in September 1998, and in June the next year, I established my own business. (End of excerpted narratives)

#### D. THÚY NONNEMANN

My family is from the North. We were from Hà Đông, near Hà Nội. In 1954, we went South. We first went by bus to Hải Phòng and we went by ship to Sài Gòn. My siblings and I continued to go to school in Sài Gòn. We attended French school and graduated from high school. I also studied at the university for three years.

In such a big city like Sài Gòn, I did not know much about the war because there was no bombing, there was no battle in Sài Gòn. I only knew that there were soldiers going to

war and family members who were injured in battle. I knew my male cousins and my male friends who went to the battles and never returned. That was how I knew about the war. I did not have to face bombings or impoverishment. Sài Gòn was an international place with delegations from many countries, and we did not lack anything.

In 1966, I met my husband in Vietnam. He went there to work for the German Red Cross. He was a medical doctor. He was sent on a mission, which was part of West Germany's efforts to help South Vietnam. When he returned to West Germany, he took me with him. We got married in 1968.

When I first came to West Germany, I did not know any other Vietnamese. At that time, I heard about Vietnamese students in Germany, but I did not have the chance to meet with them. At that time, I lived entirely in a German society.

When I came, I realized that the Germans were very friendly towards foreigners. I received a great deal of help. My neighbors, and even people on the streets, were very willing to help me. Sometimes when I was standing there on the street getting lost, people would come out of their house and asked me what I needed help with.

I had the advantage of speaking French and English. Most Germans did speak some English, and they asked me in English, and I was able to respond. At that time, I did not know any German yet, so I wasn't able to carry on a conversation in German yet. In a short while, I was able to acquire the German language facility and started working. When I started

working, I was able to learn the language much faster because I was interacting extensively with German speakers. I was forced to think and speak in German, so I learned very quickly.

When I arrived in West Germany, it was almost Lunar New Year. When I walked on the streets, there were many bushes with yellow flowers that reminded me of the Vietnamese cherry blossoms, and I was very much homesick.

It took a long time for postal mail to arrive because I came in 1968. At that time, it was right on the eve of the Tet Offensive. I was extremely worried about the safety of my family. Snail mail took a long time to get there. Being away from home, I was very concerned for my family.

During that time, in 1968, students in Germany as well as in America protested against the Vietnam War. When I walked on the streets, sometimes there were young people who asked me where I came from, and I said Vietnam. So they invited me to come with them to demonstrate against the war.

At that time I was somewhat disoriented, and I was not sure what their objectives or underpinnings were, so I declined. During that time in Vietnam, the communists had bombed schools and supermarkets, and I could not endorse them or demonstrate in support of the communists. I was against the war, but not with the conditions that the protesters had in mind. I wanted the war to end but with other conditions.

I was very fortunate. I worked at a bank. Only with my language skills in English and French, I was hired, although my German skills were very limited. The president of the bank said that if I could speak German within a year, he would hire me permanently. So I focused on acquiring the German language skills. I just went to work and went home, I did not go out or I did not take vacation. So they hired me.

In 1973, I had anticipated how the Vietnam War would end because we had updated information flow here in the west. At that time, I had already urged my family to leave Vietnam. As a journalist, my father had a wide network, but he did not want to leave Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, my family was stuck behind. My child was too young at that time for me to leave for Vietnam to bring my family here. After 1975, I filed for application to sponsor my family here, but it was not until 1980 that my parents were able to come. They lived here and passed away a few years ago.

In 1976 and 1977, there was a ship by the name of Cap Anamur. People knew that there were boat people escaping and getting drowned in the high sea. There was a rescue team sent out to rescue the boat people. I joined forces with the Vietnamese student associations to collect donations from German companies to help finance activities for that ship. Since 1979 and '80, West Germany started to receive Vietnamese refugees from Southeast Asian refugee camps and admitted them to West Germany. I also came to the refugee camps here in West Germany to help the refugees and to give them language instructions. I volunteered and helped translate or teach Ger-

man to them at the camps near my house. There were some camps established by the Red Cross. At that time, I worked with the different organizations in connection with the Red Cross and church groups to assist the poor or the refugees. After I took care of my husband and daughter, I would volunteer to help the refugees.

I have retired now, but I still continue my activist work, which is rather extensive. (End of excerpted narrative)

### SQUATTING AS RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

Simon Leung's "the residual space of the Vietnam War" (1992-1998) was a multi-genre art series that looks at the ways in which identity is forged via bodily practices such as surfing and squatting (129)<sup>38</sup>. The project was displayed in Huntington Beach, Berlin, and Vienna. The second project, which is immediately relevant to this article, is titled, "*Squatting Project/Berlin*" (1994) which "addressed the xenophobic violence manifesting in the newly unified Germany, in the Balkan states upon the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere in Europe" (132). Leung pasted one thousand posters across the city of Berlin, half of which included German text inviting the readers to imagine a city of squatters—to participate in squatting, and to observe the city from the squatting position. "In these squatting projects, Leung depicts the displaced body as one whose posture is removed from a

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<sup>38</sup> Leung, Simon and Sturken, Marita. "Displaced Bodies in Residual Spaces," *Public Culture* 17(1): 129-152.

context in which it is common practice and inserted into a context in which it is strange, out of place, alien” (133).

While his theoretical and conceptual approach in the series is apt, Leung’s focus on the informal underground economy chimes with the mainstream German media’s one-sided portrait of the Vietnamese there, a “mis-recognition” (137) in the Lacanian sense. Using the concept of “residual space” (133, without claiming original authority) and practicing “a politics of difference” (139), Leung “was thinking of the way in which the trauma of this historical event returns in fragments, in innocuous, slight, but emotionally undigested forms,” alluding to “a psychic border between fiction and history” (135). Following Žižek’s “the indivisible remainder” (138), he reframed subjectivity in the city. Leung considers “community as a kind of procedure” (139). In looking at the effect of a particular historical event, Leung thinks of “the discourse of history as a social space where the meaning and unity of the social (events, relationships, legacies, memory) are at once constituted and questioned” (151).

While Leung’s focus is on the underground economy (132) and its coupling with mainstream German media’s portrayal of Vietnamese in East Berlin, I find the visuality of his project productive to the analysis of the two Vietnamese Berlins. To Leung’s credit, I will assert that this coupling has its own pro-

ductive violence given the objective of his project and “thinking of the way in which the trauma of this historical event returns in fragments, in innocuous, slight, but emotionally undigested forms” (135). But let me return to my point of visual acuity. First, the act of squatting is an apt metaphor to think about the two Vietnamese populations as being connected through one single body (ethnic minority) but located in two distinct spaces (East versus West).

Here, I want to advance the connectedness of the two Vietnamese groups by calling forth Vietnam as the country of origin and the Vietnam War (in tandem with Western colonization in the world, World War II, and the Cold War) as the one common event that eventually leads to the immigration of both groups. This is where I argue for, alongside other points, a negation of the politics of difference—that in fact, these two groups are as much connected as they are different. In other words, both groups are in a shared contested “residual space.” Second, I find Leung’s take on “community as a kind of procedure” a useful concept in understanding the way in which the two Vietnamese groups came to occupy their places in Berlin. That is, while the Berlin brochure had rendered the histories of the two groups with single events such as boat people’s arrival and guest workers’ overstay, looking at the communities they have formed as a “procedure” will illuminate the larger processes that have brought them into being.

Besides these two stances, I wish to elaborate on one point that I feel crucial to Leung's project and my article. As I alluded to earlier, Leung's focus on the underground economy is, on the surface, a stereotype and a confluence with the German mainstream media's representation of the Vietnamese in East Berlin. Additionally, squatting as the theme of the poster project blatantly makes use of a stereotypical image of people of Asian background. This ostensibly double-stereotype is in fact used to get at the exclusion that Vietnamese Berliners face in both the East and the West. I ask, then, how can the use of the squatting image either or simultaneously dispel the stereotype and reinforce such stereotyping in the mainstream society and the ethnic population it speaks of? How many Germans actually followed Leung's invitation to squat, whether physically or mentally, in order to view Berlin from the positionality of the immigrants?

Though the effects of the squatting project are worth looking into, I did not find the related literature to comment on this except the interview cited. However, I do think that whether Leung was successful or not with his proposition to have Berliners squat and look at the city from the ground, the metaphor is crucial. In squatting, the Vietnamese immigrants bring their own habituation and queer Berlin's public scene together, and by so doing, make themselves hyper-visible beyond their legal status or lack thereof. After all, I

deem that with one thousand posters, Leung had visually forced Berliners into squatting—even for the mere instant in which they viewed the posters. By using the “out-of-place” image to engage with thinking about the place of Vietnamese immigrants—particularly those in East Berlin engaging in informal economy—Leung lets us in on how “difference” can be mediated by the simple act of changing one’s position.

### BORDERLAND-MOTHERLAND DIASPORIC SUBJECTIVITY

The various excerpted immigration narratives above show that the Vietnamese populations in Berlin are far more diverse than the boat-people-and-guest-worker binary. I argue that the two Vietnamese groups in East and West Berlin are mutually constitutive. In particular, this squatting augments the fact that Vietnamese Berliners are highly visible—both physically and discursively. This heightened visibility is owed to their non-white physical appearance and East-Berlin criminalized discourses, neither of which fit into the definition of Germanness. Together with other racialized minorities in Berlin and Europe, Vietnamese refugees and immigrants serve to define what is *not German or not European*. I concur with El-Tayeb (2008) that exclusionary treatments of “European others” are in fact continent-wide—a political racelessness that is omnipresent in Europe at the disadvantage of racialized ethnic Europeans.

While acknowledging the continent-wide practices of exclusion in Europe, I argue that the nation-states are still playing a dominant role in controlling people's lives through policies and regulations<sup>39</sup>. This stance is clearly indicative in the discourses of Vietnamese guest workers, who were closely regulated and monitored both in Vietnam and in the GDR (Mike Dennis 2007). These workers' bodies become sites of power control, the micro-level where "the nation-state manages transnationalism"—to use Roberto Alvarez' phrase (2005). Likewise, the boat people were managed by both the Vietnamese government, who persecuted them, and the West German government, who rescued and resettled them. More importantly, West Germany assigned Vietnamese boat people to various locations as part of the integration policy. This spatial management of people of color restricts their transnational experiences by severing their ability to concentrate in an area. Nonetheless, over the years, Vietnamese populations in both the East and the West gravitate toward Berlin, where they have been squatting. I argue that it is in Berlin that the experiences of the guest workers and the boat people synchronize in their squatting, despite the inherent divisions.

Squatting, then, in every sense of the word, is an act of resistance. I argue that seemingly

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Alvarez Jr., Roberto. *Mangos, Chiles, And Truckers: The Business Of Transnationalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

powerless people—such as the Vietnamese guest workers upon the loss of contract following the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as the Vietnamese boat people who newly arrived in the FRG in the late 1970s—do find ways to manage their own fate through resistance and self-definition. The boat people's autonomous relocation to West Berlin<sup>40</sup> and the guest workers' starting of small ethnic businesses both in the hostels and in the post-*Wende* Berlin are different forms of similar resistance against social, spatial, and legal subjugation. In like manner, in Pun Ngai's critical class analysis on migrant women workers from rural China, the dagongmei's conscious decision to participate in the global circuit of production and consumption—albeit its exploitation—shows how agency is at work on the ground<sup>41</sup>. As Luis Alvarez<sup>42</sup> puts it, forms of resistance such as zoot suiting are “fundamentally about self-valorization,” and “also part of an outlook on and approach to life

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<sup>40</sup> Housing is an important factor in spatial in/exclusion. In Sweden, for instance, Vietnamese immigrants who are unable to find housing in Stockholm after several years would give up and resettle in the remote areas, telling themselves that they would not be in the “light of civilization” (Stockholm living) in this lifetime. I argue that by keeping immigrants out of cosmopolitan centers such as Berlin and Stockholm, European nations successfully exclude them from “contaminating” the public scene and culture. Yet immigrants resist and some succeed in finding their place in these exclusionary spaces.

<sup>41</sup> Ngai, Pun. “Subsumption or Consumption? The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in ‘Globalizing’ China.” *Cultural Anthropology*, pp 469-492, Nov 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Alvarez, Luis. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II*. University of California Press, 2008.

that helped them claim dignity in a society that routinely dehumanized them.” Through their resistance and establishment of an ethnic economy, Vietnamese guest workers make it possible for new waves of (undocumented) immigrants to come from Vietnam via Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine and Poland (Julia Schweizer 2004 & 2005, Claire Wallace 2002). Personal decisions and family migration trends can lead to hemispheric changes, as Roberto Alvarez argues in *Familia* (1987), a study of his own family’s migration history.

Given the interconnectedness between nation-specific and Europe-wide practices of racial exclusion, I tack back and forth between Berlin as my site and the larger European continent. Vietnamese Berlin is a site where the corporeal and cultural realities of race are augmented. I use Natalie Molina’s (2005 & 2006) concept of “unfit citizens” and Mae Ngai’s “impossible subjects” (2005) to argue that the Berlin government has formulated the discourses of Vietnamese former guest-workers as undesirable, and consequently not legitimate for citizenship. This point connects with Simon Leung’s image of squatting—a visual rendition of the physicality of race—that these bodies are squatting between the spaces of il/legitimacy. At the same time, Leung’s act of squatting also highlights Molina and Mae Ngai’s articulation of how human bodies are being racialized and excluded. That is, in their very act of squatting, Viet-

nameless Berliners are interpolated as “others” and “unfit,” or “criminalized.”

Furthermore, the fatal coupling—to use Ruthie Gilmore’s phrase (2002)—of race/class/gender exacerbates the lot of racialized Europeans. I appreciate Pun Ngai’s (2003) class analysis of the assembly workers at an amusement park in China. In a stratified society, the working class is treated as inferior and ought to confine themselves to the factories where they supposedly belong. There are parallels in the way the first-class visitors interpolated the dagongmei at the amusement park in China, and the way Vietnamese guest workers are surveilled in Germany. In both cases, the workers are under a strict watch, supposed to confine themselves to their space as workers, and should not intrude into the larger social scapes.

This spatial exclusion is but one of the various forms of discrimination that racialized Europeans confront. For most Vietnamese in East Berlin, legal exclusion renders them vulnerable in multiple ways. As Heidi Castenada (2009) argues, “illegality as risk” conveys the challenges and barriers that undocumented migrants face in Berlin, confirming what El-Tayeb (2011) calls the “precarious living conditions” of ethnic minorities in Europe. “Illegality as risk” speaks of health risks that are not addressed beyond the lack of basic health care and the burden of being legally excluded. In this sense, race is again a very “bodily” phe-

nomenon, both in how ethnic bodies are racialized, as well as in how these bodies are excluded from the realm of normal standard health care and become more prone to health issues because of their very living conditions. Along this line, Natalie Molina's (2005) analysis of the process of "medicalizing" the Mexicans in Los Angeles shows how ethnic bodies were at once neglected and pathologized.

Yet against this racialization is the emergence of a thriving ethnic community—albeit doubly divided—that rises from the 1989 demise of the Berlin Wall and all exclusionary policies targeting Vietnamese guest workers that follow. I choose the year 1989 as the beginning point instead of 1975 to reflect the moment of contact between the two Vietnamese populations in the East and West, both of which have emerged in the late 1970s or early 1980s separately but not entirely independent of each other. Here, I work with the duality of one-but-two, two-yet-one Vietnamese Berlin(s). The two communities have divergent historical backgrounds, but they do have similarities such as country of origin, mother tongue, and culture. On the other hand, each Vietnamese population on the two sides of Berlin begins and develops in such distinct ways, with a mutual sense of dissociation, that they behave as two separate entities. Nonetheless, organic interactions such as inter-group marriages and religious membership—besides exchanges in the trade activities and service industry—sustain this duality with

all of its tensions and uneven congruence. In this sense, the Vietnamese Berlin population exemplifies what Simon Leung (2005) calls “community as procedural” and purports El-Tayeb’s (2003) recognition of grassroots movements as a way to forge a space for racialized European others.

However, it is important to recognize that tensions and divergence are part of every resistance movement. Luis Alvarez (2008) argues that the politics of dignity is in fact complex and diverse, “a complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural politics” beyond the obvious binaries. The nuanced complexity of dignity and/or self-determination in the zoot suite culture is also apparent in the discourses of the Vietnamese guest workers (Dennis 2007), or dagongmei (Ngai 2003), or U.S./Mexican truckers and produce traders (Alvarez 2005). It is only with a grounded approach from the bottom up that we can understand how everyday people participate in transnationalism across the social spectrum. Pun Ngai (2003), like Roberto Alvarez (2005), emphasizes the materiality of economic disparities in her studies and warns against “a nostalgic search for symbolic exchange of a ‘general economy of expenditure.’”

Furthermore, Leung’s (2005) concept of space as ‘residual’ reflects El-Tayeb’s discussion of how even with an internalist narrative (Stuart Hall’s term) that erases the contributions and participation of people of color in

the continent's past and present, the "residual" aspects of the presence of people of color play an important role in the making and sustenance of Europe and "the West." As El-Tayeb (2008) puts it, there is no modern world without people of color, and no queer theory without queer people of color. In residual Vietnamese Berlin(s), the internalist narrative insists on pushing racial minorities out of the public discourses through ethnic stigma. But people of color have learned to belong to everywhere and nowhere. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (1995), they are the new race that embraces all. In this spirit, I argue that squatting Vietnamese have transformed Berlin into a new space, a borderland-motherland that sustains the transnational connections with Vietnam (and its diasporas) while combating the racialized exclusion of white Europe.

By way of conclusion, I would like to argue that despite the climactic division between Vietnamese in East and West Berlins, there are already several "moments of encounter" and ongoing interactions between the two groups. I assert that both formal and informal processes of coming together have been taking place in an organic and productive fashion. As I have described at the beginning of this entry, the 2008 Lenten retreat in Berlin had brought together members from both communities, and while resentment continued to be part of such an encounter, the desire to connect and collaborate was also there.

Activist groups, such as the Berlin chapter of Tập Hợp Dân Chủ Đa Nguyên, bring together Vietnamese from both East and West Germany who are concerned with democratization and multi-party governance in Vietnam. During the gatherings and discussions at Dr. Phạm's residence that I participated in across the years, there were boat people, former guest workers, undocumented immigrants, exchange students coming to pre-1989 GDR, post-1975 Vietnamese diplomats who left the Vietnamese Communist Party after experiencing what they uphold as the free world, activists, and professionals who have worked with Vietnamese from both the East and the West. These discussions put me in direct contact with what it looks like for the North/South East/West division to be bridged.

Beyond formal engagements are the natural ways in which people come together, which I phrase "meet, greet, and breed." Phan Đăng Hiến was a boat person, and Mai Hà Phương was a former guest worker whose family has close ties with the Vietnamese government in Hà Nội. Yet they have been happily married with grown children, and while their political orientations continue to differ, they accept one another for who the other person is. Several other couples with similarly divided backgrounds can be found across Berlin and Germany. Moreover, Vietnamese people often form surrogate families to support each other, as the Vietnamese proverb

goes, “To trade your blood relatives in the distant land for your nearby neighbors” (translation mine, original: Bán bà con xa, mua láng giềng gần). This social fabric has played a key role in helping Vietnamese create new communities and economic niches. I argue that this social practice of adopting each other as secondary family also helps alleviate the division so vividly felt. Mai Hà Phương and “Surrogate Grandma”—while clashing in political views because the latter condemns the current Vietnamese regime—take each other as daughter and mother to look out for each other. Mai shares her food with Grandma, and Grandma provides much-needed postpartum care to Mai for both of her births since her mother still lives in Vietnam. These two people each has her own opinions and orientations, but that does not stop them from coming together. It is this form of informal social mutual assistantship that is salient in the Vietnamese culture that has been at work in helping Vietnamese in Berlin and in the diasporas negotiate the lines of demarcation they inherit from Vietnam’s long history of wars.

### **Selected Oral History Interviews in Vietnamese in Chronological Order**

These are oral history interviews I conducted across the years since 2004 in Sweden, Poland, and Germany. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, and the narrators occasionally used

German, Polish, or Swedish words. All English translations in this entry are mine.

Note: *Names in quotation marks (Kay, Uncle Stateless, Mr. Trường Sơn, Sister Autonomy) are pseudonyms for narrators who wish for their stories to be anonymous and without tape recording. The names are based on self-identification characteristics of the narrators. Kay is a name I came up with for a lady who split her time between Germany and Sweden. Uncle Stateless is an undocumented immigrant living in Bandaghen, Stockholm, who calls himself a stateless and had come to Sweden from Eastern Germany. Mr. Trường Sơn speaks about the Vietnam War and posits that the Trường Sơn route (during the Vietnam War) is not justifiable in the face of human loss. Sister Autonomy invokes the difficulty of straddling a Vietnamese-oriented family environment and a German individualistic society. Those names are only mnemonic cues to help me keep track of the narratives and field notes.*

#### **From the Vietnamese Stockholm Project, 2004:**

Glasse-Trầnquyễn, Trangđài & “Kay.” Oral History Interview. September 30, 2004. Stockholm, Sweden.

Glasse-Trầnquyễn, Trangđài & Phan Hiến Mạnh. Oral History Interview. November 6, 2004. Malmo, Sweden.

Glasse-Trầnquyễn, Trangđài & “Uncle Stateless.” Oral History Interview. December 2004. Stockholm, Sweden.

#### **From the Vietnamese Berlin Project, 2005:**

Glasse-Trầnquyễn, Trangđài & “Mr. Trường Sơn.” Oral History Interview. March 6, 2005. Berlin, Germany.

- Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Lê Thăng Lợi. Oral History Interview. March 2005. Berlin, Germany.
- Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Lê Lương Cẩn, Owner of Thủy Tiên Wholesale & Cultural Center (non-recorded, with video footage of the Center). Berlin, Germany. March 6, 2005.
- Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Ms. Đào (cloth stand at Ost Bahnhof Station). Oral History Interview (at open air market, non-recorded). March 6, 2005. Berlin, Germany.
- Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Mr. Dũng & Spouse (China Pan food stand owner). Oral History Interview (at open air market, non-recorded). March 6, 2005. Berlin, Germany.
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- Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Nguyễn Sơn Thạch. Oral History Interview. March 19, 2008. Berlin, Germany.
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- Glassey-Trầnnguyễn, Trangđài & Đỗ Thế Hoàng. Oral History Interview. March 21, 2008. Berlin, Germany.
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### **Author’s Publications on Vietnamese Berlin**

2012. Guest lecture. “*Cyber Exclusion in the Global Information Age: Stateless Vietnamese in Tonle Sap, Berlin, and Warsaw.*” Women’s Studies 795/ International Studies 795/895: Gender and International Migration. Spring 2012. (Invited by Ms. Erika Frydenlund and Dr. Jennifer N. Fish, Associate Professor and Chair of Women’s Studies, Old Dominion University, Virginia, USA).

2012. *“Cyber Exclusion in the Global Information Age: Stateless Vietnamese in Tonle Sap, Berlin, and Warsaw.”* Internationals Studies Association, Annual Convention.
- 2009-2010. “Viet Birds, World Sky,” a commissioned bilingual weekly column, *Việt Herald Daily*. Orange County, CA, USA.
2009. Bilingual Keynote. *“Thuyền Nhân Việt Nam Toàn Cầu trong Thiên Niên Kỷ Thứ Ba: Tìm Lịch Sử, Giữ Tương Lai. Vietnamese Boat People in the Third Millennium: Seeking History, Growing Legacy.”* Year-long Project and Multidisciplinary Program: “Ra Khơi: Tưởng Niệm Thuyền Nhân Vượt Biển. Set Sail: Commemorating the Vietnamese Boat People.” Gạch Nối Magazine and Association, UC San Diego.
2009. *“Vietnamese Berlins 1975-2010: Historical Inequalities, Contemporary Diversities.”* All-Grad Research Symposium, UC San Diego.
2009. *“Vietnamese Berlins 1975-2008: Historical Divergence, Contemporary Integration.”* Crossing Borders Conference, “Serve the People? Ethnic Studies Between Theory and Practice.” University of Southern California.
2008. *“Immigration in the Vietnamese Diasporas: 1975-2008,”* Bilingual Keynote. Black April Commemoration, Colina Park, San Diego. VAYA Vietnamese American Youth Alliance.
2008. Radio Multikulti. “Vietnamese Berlin Project.” Interviewed by Mr. Phan Đăng Hiến for the Vietnamese section. (2 consecutive sessions).
2007. “In Their Own Spaces: Children En Route.” Ethnographic Documentary, ftsmj Productions. Premier screening at Anthropology Conference, UC Davis.

2007. Issue's Feature. "Which Route? Vietnamese Communities around the Globe." *Nhà Magazine*, a San Jose-based monthly publication focusing on Life Style, Culture, and Identity.
2007. "*The Stateless and the Nameless: Sovereignty in the Liberal World.*" 5th Annual Conference of Ethnic Studies in California. "Ghosts, Monsters, and the Dead." UC San Diego.
2007. "*The Subtexts of Conjurers and Construals: Children En Route.*" A Documentary, Premiere. Symposium "Midnight University." University Club, UC Davis.
- 2005, Summer. *The Funnel*, a newsmagazine of the German American Fulbright Commission. Number 2, Volume 41. Pg 15 (Trangdai Tranguyen, Fulbrighter in Sweden, discusses the continuing psychological division of Berlin with André Schmitz during the reception at city hall.)
2005. Interview by Ms. Nguyễn Huỳnh Mai for the New Horizon Radio. "Trangdài Trầnguyễn: Her Fulbright Project in Sweden and Perspectives about Vietnamese in Europe."
2005. "*Contemporary Childhood in the Vietnamese Diasporas.*" 37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology. Stockholm, Sweden.
2005. Radio Multikulti. "A Vietnamese American Fulbrighter's Initial Observations about Vietnamese in Berlin." Interviewed by Mr. Phan Đắng Hiển for the Vietnamese section. (2 consecutive weekly sessions).

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