

When is a Vietnamese a Filipino?

Social integration in an era of deterritorialized nationalism

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Paper presentation for the 2nd International Conference on Vietnamese Studies,
July 14th to July 16th 2004, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Not long after I sat down to write this essay, my eye fell upon the headline, “Hope for Refugees” in a local paper.¹ A pleasant photo featured Tran Trung’s smiling family, the caption underneath read, that they were “among the world’s last unsettled Vietnamese refugees” and that Vietnamese like Tran’s family were to be given a “new chance to settle in the U.S. “Hope for Refugees” then described the inhospitable conditions of stateless Vietnamese in the Philippines: selling sandals or “Miss Saigon” perfume for pennies in Manila’s toughest slums and living in legal limbo. My paper offers a preliminary but more elaborated version of the story behind the “world’s last unsettled Vietnamese refugees.” It will attend to the tensions of integrating stateless Vietnamese into a Philippine sense of nationhood from 1996 to 2004 when stateless Vietnamese were allowed to remain in the Philippines indeterminately pending permanent residency status. It captures the variations of Vietnamese statelessness in the Philippines -- as Vietnamese boat persons (VBP), illegal aliens and economic migrants, Resident Vietnamese Nationals (RVNs), and finally, the last refugees from the Vietnam war enroute to US. Each designation carried with it particular associations and discursive strategies both for those deploying the category, and those to whom it appended. Those involved in the issue of stateless Vietnamese in the Philippines included the Philippine church, state, and media,

¹ B. Stocking, “Hope for Refugees,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 9 June 2004.

overseas Vietnamese, and U.S. officials and media. Each employed the stateless Vietnamese as a foil for their own self-representation. Stateless Vietnamese as political subjects revised their presentation in order to accommodate others and launch their own interests.

Nationhood deterritorialized

Regime changes in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975 initiated a mass exodus of into neighboring countries. These flows must also be set within an era in which global migration was accelerating. In addition to refugees, over 100 million people crossed borders as immigrants, legal and illegal migrant laborers, students, professionals, tourists and diplomats. By the early 1990's, thousands of labor migrants from poor countries such as the Philippines were fueling the engines of the NICs and Tigers. Dependent on \$6 billion in remittances the Philippines exported more contract labor to affluent Asia as well as Middle East than any other Asian country. These massive population flows in the last thirty years have pressed ASEAN nations to a public discourse over three related issues: criteria for an 'authentic' national identity that is increasingly deterritorialized, the treatment of non-nationals within their territory— migrant laborers, illegal immigrants, and refugees. And following from this is the question of naturalization: who can become a citizen?

These three concerns have been vigorously addressed by the Philippine government in the last decade. The deterritorialization of Filipino citizens, particularly domestic workers, gained much attention in the last few years, but much of the focus is on experiences of migrant workers elsewhere; less on their reintegration when they return. Philippine policy has increasingly opened a space for its deterritorialized citizens. In 1995, prompted by public outrage at Singapore's decision to execute domestic worker Flor Contemplacion, President Ramos encouraged Congress to pass a historic migration-related bill: the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995. It concretized the government's commitment to protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers and other overseas Filipinos in distress. The Act authorized a P100 million fund to cover repatriation expenses of displaced migrants. It was intended as an aid to reintegration for

returning workers often exhaust savings and leave again for work.² Other dramatic efforts to widen the extraterritorial girth of the nation were the Alien Social Integration Act of 1995 (I will return to this later), the Administrative Naturalization Law of 2000, which streamlined the naturalization process effected, the Absentee Overseas Voting Act of 2003 and the long-awaited approval of dual citizenship in the same year. In sum, new laws both for reception of aliens and retention of citizen participation indicate a reframing of the primacy of territory as single most category for belonging.

Given national concerns regarding these other matters, there was limited public interest in discussions regarding whether or not to assimilate a small stateless community. What these legislative changes do not indicate is the process of informal social integration that aliens are pressed into. Modern law and polity rest on the concept of the citizen as an autonomous, free individual with specific rights and duties. This political category of citizenship signifies membership in a state. Let me turn for a moment to the cultural and political nature of citizenship and social integration, of what I call cultural citizenship.

Cultural citizenship

Citizens may be born, but they must also be made. Turner argues that it is not only a legal status nor a political category of membership, but also a way of defining personhood in modern societies.³ Political cultures vary on what constitutes a person as a political subject. Thus, the citizen is the ideal embodiment of a nation, which leaves its ideological imprimatur on the legal body of each member. Those normalized into this citizenship and those who are "naturalized" participate in a process of cultural formation through state and social institutions. This bureaucratic regulatory function is an inherent aspect of the nation-state in the later twentieth century, whether advanced capitalist or non-industrial revolutionary communist state whose goals are to reinscribe its citizens with new ideological identities. Thus, as a set of practices, citizenship is understood as a

² Republic Act No. 8042 or Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995. Some features include data-sharing among the agencies servicing migrant, issuing travel advisories, financing schemes for pre-departure loans, 24-hour information and assistance centers where there are large concentration of workers, and other services.

³ B. Turner, "Contemporary Problems in the Theory of Citizenship," In *Citizenship and Social Theory*, (London: Sage Publications, 1993)

social construction -- in the world of Foucault, a "truth regime" which persons negotiate in order to produce for themselves the identity of the citizen.⁴

This process also occurs in a heightened way with those outside legal membership, such as refugees and illegal aliens. Acquiring cultural citizenship is thus not naturalization per se; it is the inculcation of norms, rhetoric and practices of national self-representation. Furthermore, this process responds to characterizations of any subaltern alien group by dominant culture—are they a burden or a threat, do they assimilate or do they isolate? Will they become like us? Do they like us? Do we like them? Do they deserve to belong?

Statelessness

Transnational theories in anthropology and cultural studies explore the cultural production of such deterritorialized subjects displaced from homeland, culture, and origins.⁵ Of course, the most de-nationalized citizens are stateless persons, who are often refugees. A stateless person does not have any nationality under the law of any state. There are two classifications: de jure (original and subsequent) and de facto. One can be stateless at birth (original) or later when they lose their nationality without gaining another (subsequent). In 1949, the UN added de facto statelessness which assumes that persons have lost the protection and assistance of national authorities either by refusal of the state or personal choice.⁶ This latter category refers most often to refugee status. The main international legal instruments dealing with refugees are the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 (1951 Convention) and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1967 (1967 Protocol). These instruments define "refugee" as one who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside

⁴ M. Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. ed. Colin Gordon. (New York: Random House, 1977)

⁵ A. Appadurai "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology" in R. Fox, ed *Recapturing Anthropology; Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1991) 1990; P. Cheah and B. Robbins, Eds, *Cosmopolitics. Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

⁶ R. Settlage "No Place To Call Home Stateless Vietnamese Asylum-Seekers In Hong Kong" *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* Fall (Fall 1997)

the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unwilling or, owing to such fear, is unable to return to it.⁷

Despite this definition, the question, 'what is a refugee?' has been the subject of much discussion in the last decades.⁸ Further debates on the definition's contemporary relevance indicate that motivations for departure and the meaning of persecution are not so fixed.⁹ Neither is the association of statelessness with refugee-ness.

Political subjectivity

In this paper, I am concerned with the ways that refugees, as designated by others, and self-appropriated, negotiate their status. As targets of a revolutionary order, citizens become aware of themselves as inhabitants of history, as "political animals" entrapped in the state's territory and accosted by another. It foregrounds the nation-state's role in determining the political identity of various bodies in its domain and the alliances (or interference) of other states' interests in this process. This we will see in the case of the Philippines and U.S. references to stateless Vietnamese. The political subjectivity of refugees in this case is constituted by successive relationships to contending nation-states in which each state enacts its differing policies on bodies of a mobile populace. As political subjects, constituted through relations of power, they are not without agency. Allen Feldman retrieves political agency in Foucault's subjects as "the effect of situated practices" which are self-determinations of identity.¹⁰ Feldman approaches power "from its point of effect and generation--agency".¹¹ Political agency is a practice that in itself

⁷ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted July 28, 1951, cited in United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 189, No.2545, (1954).

⁸ C. Kwok Bun and K Christie, "Past, Present and Future: The Indochinese Refugee Experience Twenty Years Later," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 8 (1995), pp 75-93.

⁹ A. Helton, BOOK REVIEW and NOTE: Refugee Rights and Realities: Evolving International Concepts and Regimes. Edited by Frances Nicholson and Patrick Twomey Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. *The American Journal International Law* April, 2001 95 A.J.I.L. 478

¹⁰ A. Feldman, *Allan Formations of Violence. The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

¹¹ *Ibid*, 3

constitutes political subjectivity, a subjectivity located in the body. Thus, as political subjects stateless Vietnamese negotiate the meaning of their own shifting statuses, and choose one over another when opportunity presents itself.

Negotiating refugee identity in Asia

Muntarbhorn has noted that almost every country in Asia has been either a refugee-producing country or a refugee-receiving country since the Second World War.¹² However, laws for protection of refugees is the exception rather than the rule in the majority of Asian countries. During the decades after the end of the war in Vietnam, more than two million people fled in search of asylum and resettlement. At its height in 1979, the departure rate was over 40,000 per month. The majority left in dilapidated overcrowded boats and were thus called "boat people".¹³ By 1992, when the outflow finally dwindled, more than 800,000 Vietnamese taken arrived on neighboring ASEAN shores.¹⁴

In order to address the massive outflow of refugees particularly from Vietnam the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convened two international conferences on Indochinese refugees in 1979 and 1989.¹⁵ At the Geneva Meeting on Refugees and Displaced Persons in South-East Asia in 1979, Vietnamese asylum seekers were automatically designated as refugees without further screening. Impacted ASEAN countries agreed to offer temporary refuge to asylum seekers, while Western nations (US, Canada and others) agreed to take all refugees for resettlement. Meanwhile, Vietnam agreed to curtail the massive exodus. It was an agreement that could not last. The continual outflow ebbed and surged and reasons for departure—whether political or economic became blurred. By 1988 as increased numbers overwhelmed the countries who received the bulk of arrivals (Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong), new interdiction

¹² V. Muntarbhorn, *The Status of Refugees in Asia*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

¹³ B. Grant, *The Boat People* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1979).

¹⁴ F. Ismail, "Urgent Action Needed to Protect Refugees," *Business Times* (Malaysia), Nov. 18, 1993,

¹⁵ UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees*. 1995

policies were initiated, refusing even temporary refuge. Additionally, due to “compassion fatigue” the countries of resettlement could not match the number of requests.

At the peak of this crisis in 1989, the UNHCR called for a Second International Conference on Indochinese Refugees. It resulted in the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees (henceforth CPA). The most radical change effected under the CPA was the change in refugee status. First asylum countries no longer automatically recognized asylum-seekers as refugees. Thus, “boat people” first deemed bona fide refugees were reclassified as illegal immigrants or economic migrants on March 14, 1989. They were detained pending a determination of refugee status adjudicated according to the guidelines of the UNHCR, the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.¹⁶ Those deemed refugees would be offered the opportunity to resettle within the 55,000 quota ceiling of countries of resettlement on a multi-annual basis. Meanwhile Vietnam agreed to increase security measures to prevent illegal departures and would strengthen its Orderly Departure Program. The CPA intended that such programs the "primary and eventually sole modes of departure" and Vietnam agreed to a MOU with the UNHCR that no punitive measures would be taken against returning citizens. The majority of boat people from 1989 forward were classified as economic migrants and illegal aliens. They could either volunteer to return to Vietnam under the UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Program, or be forcibly returned to Vietnam by the first asylum countries. The CPA stemmed the tide of boat people, and it slowly began to empty the camps as more Vietnamese reluctantly accepted repatriation as their only option. The CPA was held in effect until March 1996. At this point, all camps were closed, the UNHCR withdrew its support, and the 36,000 Vietnamese (“deemed not refugees”) remaining in camps were supposed to be sent back to Vietnam.¹⁷

¹⁶ Muntarbhorn, *The Status of Refugee in Southeast Asia*, pp 22-25.

¹⁷ Statement of Charles Sykes, Head of the U.S. Delegation to the Seventh CPA Steering Committee, Geneva March 1996. <http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/ea/vietnam/refuge96.htm>

As a country of first asylum, the Philippines received a relatively low number of Vietnamese boat people at 3,600 per year until 1990 when flows ebbed. It hosted two refugee camps.¹⁸ The Palawan First Asylum Camp (PFAC) established in 1979 was a closed camp for asylum seekers. The Bataan Refugee Processing Center some 600 km away was established in 1982 expressly for refugees enroute to the US. The Philippines was reputed to be the "most hospitable and open country in the region for refugees." This can be supported in several ways. First, it was the sole signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol among ASEAN nations. Furthermore, in 1999, it became the first member of ASEAN to establish a formal refugee status determination system.¹⁹ Second, its closed first asylum camp in Palawan was more lenient than its counterparts, allowing self-governance, independent employment, and offering education to the occupants. Third, it continued (albeit begrudgingly) to receive rescue-at-sea cases when other first asylum countries stopped accepting them. Finally, the Philippines was unique among ASEAN in permitting Vietnamese denied refugee status under the CPA to remain. I shall return to this in a moment.

The politics of changing designations

During their stay in the Philippines, the occupants of the Palawan First Asylum Camp had taken various appellations. The most common shorthand for them in public discourse was "VBP" (Vietnamese Boat People). In 1989, as elsewhere in the region, VBPs were no longer automatically assigned refugee status, and became illegal aliens. By the fateful date in 1996, 1,850 Vietnamese (968 families) in Palawan had been refused refugee status. Few had taken the opportunity to repatriate to Vietnam since the early 1990's. On February 14 1996 Vietnamese illegal aliens were frog-marched to a waiting plane to be returned to Vietnam. But additional flights were cancelled when the

¹⁸ I. de Castro, "Refugees: Vietnamese Boat People in No Hurry to Return Home," Inter Press Service, 25 Oct. 1993.

¹⁹ The Refugee Processing Unit (RPU), in the Department of Justice, determines refugee status from applications forwarded by UNHCR. The government issues renewable Alien Certificates of Residence to persons granted refugee status. In 2002, Philippines hosted 114 persons recognized as refugees under the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey (2003).

remaining Vietnamese rioted while troops fired warning shots and used a water cannon. During the melee, nearly 600 Vietnamese fled Palawan.

The crisis forced a temporary stop to flights as President Ramos conferred with Roman Catholic Bishops. In a country that is 95% Catholic, the church hierarchy wields great political power and moral authority. A Catholic NGO, Center for Assistance to Displaced Persons, Inc. better known as CADP run by a Vietnamese Sister of Charity had served the Palawan Vietnamese community since the early 1980's.²⁰ Now, Sr, Pascale Le Thi Triu along with the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines intervened on behalf of Vietnamese, offering to care for their welfare with the help of non-governmental groups. The 1997 Memorandum of Understanding between the church and Ramos government granted the Vietnamese the ability to apply for permanent residence status. As further reclassification, the MOU renamed the VBPs, Remaining Vietnamese Nationals (RVNs). As RVNs, the Vietnamese status was still in limbo, but with the hope of permanent residency, new opportunities opened. Philippine government asked the Vietnamese to choose among repatriation, resettlement to another country, or permanent residence eventually leading to Philippine citizenship. Those who live outside the village would be registered with the local Catholic Church which would provide protection and assistance. Some 750 of the 968 families opted for permanent residence.²¹

The new RVN status was emphasized in May 1998 when President Fidel Ramos signed Executive order No 479 granted permanent resident status to certain Vietnamese citizens and Filipino-Vietnamese children. But promise held little weight once Ramos left office. In early 2003, officials had designed and were circulating a Vietnamese social integration bill that was several years in the making, but had not placed it on the agenda.

²⁰ CADP, "Viet Village Status Report," August 15, 1997
<http://www.vietcatholic.net/palawan/report9708a.html>

²¹ US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey (2003)
http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/easia_pacific/philippines.htm

Illegal Aliens?

The case of stateless Vietnamese inspired reflection on what kind of aliens the nation would accommodate. The particular alienness of refugees was juxtaposed with several bills on illegal aliens and naturalization. The most pertinent of these was the Alien Social Integration Act of 1995, offering amnesty to an estimated 100,000 illegal aliens who entered the Philippines before June 20, 1993 if they applied before June 30 1997. Its primary objectives were to integrate qualified illegal aliens into the mainstream of Philippine society, to better monitor the number of unlawful aliens in the country, to curtail corrupt practices, and to generate income through fees.²² The Vietnamese, however, were not eligible for the program. As the Alien Social Integration Act was still open for application in 1996 during the deliberation about the fate of the Vietnamese Boat People, it inspired a reflection on the different meaning of illegality. Senator Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. in the Senate Committee Hearing, argued that while the RVNs could not be considered illegal aliens within the meaning of the Alien Social Integration Act, they should belong to a more “sympathetic” category of illegal alien since the circumstances of their entry into Philippine shores were de facto brought about by the communist regime in Vietnam. Their peculiar status of stateless illegal aliens also meant that qualifying for permanent residency status required a special law. In a discussion about their status, Atty. Ruben Fuentebella from the Department of Justice explained that RVNs were not qualified for the permanent resident status because they entered the country illegally, and some who would be ineligible under the new Bill.²³

The most ardent proponent of Vietnamese social integration was Congressman Mitra, from Palawan. In a provincial hearing in October 2002, Mitra stressed that the remaining Vietnamese nationals had proven themselves as self-reliant, peace loving, law abiding and civic oriented individuals earning the respect of the community. He argued that permanent residency was necessary because

They have no firm protection under our laws and are therefore vulnerable

²² Republic Act No. 7919 or Alien Social Integration Act of 1995 (ASIA). While the first deadline for application for asylum was December 31, 1996, Republic Act No.8247 extended the deadline to June 30 1997.

²³ D. Maquiling, Permanent residency status for boat people gets House Committee on Justice nod **The Palawan Sun**, Issue 4-7, October 2002.

to manipulation, harassment, abuse and may be subject to deportation. Their children born and/or raised in the Philippines are not eligible for further education.”²⁴

In his closing statement, he pleaded that

Consistent with our adherence to internationally recognized principles on human rights enshrined in our Constitution and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments, and above all, as people living in the free world, let us seek to grant permanent residence status to qualified Vietnamese Refugees and asylum seekers in the Philippines.

This sentiment was corroborated by a group, led by Mr. Che Nhat Giao, Remaining Vietnamese Nationals Representative, who displayed a streamer scribbled with PLEASE, GRANT US PERMANENT RESIDENT STATUS and Philippine colored flaglets.²⁵

The Government reflects on itself and RVNs respond

The Philippines was the only Asian country to offer sanctuary to Vietnamese who were no longer refugees, and the decision inspired some soul-searching among those who negotiated the pact. It juxtaposed religious obligation to the Other against state obligation to its own citizens. What emerged was a representation of an enlightened Philippine compassion on the part of religious and government officials. Bishop Ramon Arguelles, instrumental in negotiating the MOU, states,

The last part of this century is marked with suffering, but we should show a sign of brotherhood in this part of the world. Our message is like that of the 'people power' (revolution) in EDSA. For this we gained points in humanity."

He links the historic Filipino eschewal of violence through “people power” to an eschewal of nationalist parochialism, calling for a wider “brotherhood” and “humanity.”

²⁴ Ibid. The two separate house bill nos. 1272 “An act granting permanent residence status under certain conditions to Vietnamese Refugees through a social integration program”, and 5271 “An act granting permanent residence status to the Remaining Vietnamese Nationals (RVN) through a social integration program” were consolidated in October 2002.

²⁵ Ibid.

Fidel Ramos is more explicit in crediting the nation when he declares that the agreement, "reflects our concern for our remaining Vietnamese brothers and sisters cast on our shores and reaffirms the compassionate nature of our society."²⁶ Secretary of Foreign Affairs Domingo L. Siazon, on the other hand stresses the tension between citizen and human rights. "We have indicated to them...for reasons of equity (that we) have to take care of our Filipinos first but they, and I think correctly so, have argued that human beings are human beings irrespective of nationalities and if they have needs then we must assist them."²⁷

If the government appeared gracious, the RVNs were remanded to appear grateful. This representation of Vietnamese as "assets" grateful for their new-found security was a shared discourse by church, government, community, and the Vietnamese themselves. The church, represented by Sr. Pascale, was first to underscore the gratitude of stateless Vietnamese. Her open letter to President Ramos, noted that his intervention enabled remaining Vietnamese "to grow and reach the stature of dignified human beings." she wrote that the Vietnamese "spend the rest of their days thanking God for allowing them to land in the arms of the Filipino people and be finally adopted by the country under your administration."²⁸

A significant aspect of the MOU was the removal of RVNs from the Palawan First Asylum Camp to Vietville, located 15 kilometers from the main city of Puerto Princessa. The US\$1.3 million required to purchase land and develop the village were solicited by CADP and Bishop Ramon Arguelles, head of the Episcopal Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI) from overseas Vietnamese. By early 1997, 155 housing

²⁶ A. Lopez, "'Boat People' No More": Palawan gives a home to its Last Vietnamese Refugees" <http://www.palawan.com/palawanstories/littlesaigon.html> . Other senators had also supported the government's repeal of forcible repatriation of the Vietnamese including Sen Leticia Ramos-Shahani and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

²⁷ Catholic World News, "Philippines Agrees Not To Forcibly Repatriate Vietnamese," 5 February 1996. <http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=60>

²⁸ Sol Jose Vanzi, "Vietnamese Refugees Laud RVR Intervention, June 11, 1998 Philippine Headline News Online. <http://www.newsflash.org/199806/ht/ht000420.htm>

units were constructed for 650 persons.. However, by 2000 only a third of the remaining RVNs still lived in Palawan.

The decision to move RVNs to Vietville was deemed necessary by the government to “insure that no Vietnamese would be found vagrant and jobless and thus become dependent and a burden to the Philippine society.”²⁹ The concern that “if you are too heavy, the government would not be able to carry you,” had driven church supporters and the Vietnamese remaining to stress what Sr. Pascale Le Thi Triu has called, “progressive self-reliance.” The new sense of stability, she argues, lends itself to productivity. To one reporter, she quoted the Vietnamese phrase: “an cu la nghiep” that means you cannot progress unless you are settled.”³⁰ A primary showcase for this “progressive self reliance” is Vietville itself. CADP and overseas Vietnamese such as Bui Duc Hap, a structural engineer from the US offer their skills for Vietville’s development intended the small village to model environmental sustainability. There is zero-waste management, recycling of waste water and a program of environmental protection.³¹ While Vietville’s resources such as the chapel and medical dispensary are open to neighboring Filipinos, it was also projected as a tourist attraction for the overseas Vietnamese in the US and Canada.

However, Puerto Princesa City Mayor Edward Hagedorn stressed Vietville actually showcased “Filipino hospitality especially among the people of its Asian neighbors,”³² His comment is symptomatic of a reticence if not outright hostility among Filipinos in Palawan that Vietnamese self-reliance might become economic dominance. In an oblique reference to this, one journalist indicates that “taking root” requires an “appreciation of the culture and norms of the new homeland” as well as its language.³³ Vietnamese, sensitive to this, have stressed the gratitude and national alliances between Vietnamese

²⁹ CADP, “Viet Village Status Report”

³⁰ C. Doyo, “ A Place in the Sun for Vietnam's Boat People”

³¹ Ibid

³² Sid Balatan, “Vietnamese Refugees achieve American Dream in the Philippines” *Asian Journal*, 30 July 2003

³³ Doyo,, “ A Place in the Sun..”

and Filipino. This was most evident in Giao's speech before government deliberation on Vietnamese social integration

We envision, with guidance, to become self-reliant, law abiding, productive and entrepreneurial individuals and families. More importantly, we shall forever carve in our hearts, an enduring sense of gratitude for the land of the Philippines. The Viet Ville in the City of Puerto Princesa and the Province of Palawan shall continue to be a living reminder of this humanitarian act of the Filipino people, a place of brother and sisterhood between Vietnamese and Filipinos and a symbol of the particular place where our human dignity has been redeemed."

At the first anniversary of Vietville's founding, a Filipino journalist waxed on the enthusiasm of Vietnamese for their new home. It was a transformation of identity, the "once sullen and segregated Vietnamese asylum seekers (AS), also called remaining boat people (RBP)" are on their way to becoming Filipino citizens." All those who assisted in securing both their "security" and their new village are to be thanked: "Catholic Church hierarchy and institutions as well as kind-hearted individuals from the Philippines and abroad. Philippine officials were not to be counted out."³⁴ This gratefulness overflows. She quotes the inhabitants of Vietville who

'appreciate the privilege and unique opportunity to be free and enabled to have a life so rich in social concern. They hope to tell the world about the boundless love that returned to the remaining boat people their inalienable human dignity. That boundless love is none other than the Philippines' indiscriminating embrace.'³⁵

The Venerable Thich Giac Nhien, president of the International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association in California also spoke at the celebration, indicating to Church officials present, "We have heard praises for what you have done for the people. I'd like to tell the world of our admiration for the Church and the government of the Philippines." Then,

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid.

gently chiding the Vietnamese present, he added "You are indebted. ... You have to be assets to this country."³⁶

In addition to gratitude, Filipino journalists represent RVNs as realizing in the Philippines the potential fulfillment of their "American dreams" – economic well being and freedom. Sid Balatan is most explicit about this in his article, "Vietnamese Refugees achieve American Dream in the Philippines" After a detailed description of Vietville, its isolation and productivity (and the best food on the island), he interviews some of its occupants about their hopes as refugees. He quotes from the ever-visible Che Nhat Giao, also chairman of the Vietnamese Executive Committee of Vietville, an ardent supporter of permanent residency status, who reflects on their dream of "landing in America. Despite the US government denial of our asylum application, our American Dream is now slowly being realized in the Philippines. Here we are allowed to travel around the province, put-up businesses, buy a car and build this unique village"³⁷

To another Vietnamese who arrived in 1981 but was still ineligible for resettlement, "The Philippines is a country of freedom." The journalist noted that the appreciation of freedom is mixed with a concern for self-reliance:

‘After being oppressed for a long time in Vietnam," says Lam, "we've chosen to live in the Philippines because it is a country of freedom. We have seen the kindness of Filipinos.’ He is keen to be more productive. "We'll need three years or more to become self-reliant," Lam says. ‘We don't want to be a burden to our benefactor.’³⁸

Becoming stateless and abject again

There were, however, other representations of the Vietnamese left in Palawan. These portrayed conditions as harsh, the people as destitute and hopeless, the government

³⁶ Union of Catholic Asian News, "Remaining Vietnamese Hopeful after Year of Borrowed Freedom." *UCAN Report: PL9950.0973, April 30, 1998* <http://www.ucanews.com/~ucasian/our/pl9950.htm>

³⁷ Balatan, "Vietnamese Refugees..."

³⁸ Union of Catholic Asian News, "Remaining Vietnamese Hopeful after Year of Borrowed Freedom." *UCAN Report: PL9950.0973, April 30, 1998* <http://www.ucanews.com/~ucasian/our/pl9950.htm>

corrupt, and CADP as unwilling to deliver on their ultimate dream—America. In this characterization, the primary hero is a young Vietnamese Australian lawyer Hoi Trinh who lobbied tirelessly first in Australia and then the US to restore the Philippine Vietnamese to refugee status and secure their resettlement in America. Thus, in these web-based representations, there is a contest of interests in which Sr Pascale, working to get the social integration act through Philippine Congress, would undermine Trinh's efforts to get Vietnamese refugee status in the US.

The primary source for this position on the Vietnamese remaining in the Philippines is the website: <http://www.vietphi.com/> "A cry for help. A Forum for Stateless Vietnamese in the Philippines" This site posts most material supporting its agenda of US resettlement for stateless Vietnamese, including various lobby letters written by Vietnamese American groups. Throughout the site, Vietnamese in the Philippines are referred to as refugees and thus eligible for resettlement in the U.S. In some opinion pieces, Sr. Pascale is excoriated for denying them this right. The most telling indicator of a shift on the part of RVNs towards the option for US resettlement is a statement by The Vietnamese Community in the Philippines which was founded in 2003. The statement disengages itself from CADP's sponsorship and claims self-representation. Its constituency is unclear. It is carefully worded. The Vietnamese Community in the Philippines first express gratitude for Filipino lawmakers who support their hope of being resettled and to Bishop Arguello for intervening in 1996 "which allowed us to remain in the Philippines while our cases for resettlement could be considered." They then claim sole authority for representing "stateless Vietnamese" in the Philippines, noting that while CADP under Sr Pascale "once helped" their community it "no longer represents us in whatsoever form" because CADP has not assisted with their goal of resettlement. It ends: "Thank you the Philippines for allowing us to stay while we continue to find a way of reuniting with our relatives abroad." By interpolating the future into the past, The Vietnamese Community in the Philippines reframes the goal of MOU as refugee resettlement in the U.S. It is a careful act of amnesia to forget that when the Philippine government offered three options: the possibility of repatriation, continued application for resettlement and permanent residency most Remaining Vietnamese chose the latter.

The plight of stateless refugees is no better depicted than in an article entitled “Vietnamese may finally make it to the U.S.,” posted Dec 4 2004.³⁹ This is a forlorn portrait of Vietnamese “abandoned” in the Philippines – abject, desperately poor, bereft of the freedom they risked their lives to seek. Because the remaining Vietnamese in the Philippines have repeatedly been denied refugee status, and are thus designated economic migrants, such an article must carefully stress both the dreams of economic success and freedom. It juxtaposes the economic success of the Vietnamese family members in the US with their kin in Palawan. Juxtaposing freedom is more delicate, for the Philippines is a democratic country, and the Act pending in Congress would grant stateless Vietnamese permanent residency, resolving the indeterminacy inherent in statelessness. Berg’s point is this--- freedom in the Philippines is incomparable with real freedom in America. To make its point, the article offers numerous formulaic stories of refugee hardship in the search for freedom. I recount it in full.

A few miles away Hong Thi Tran, 43, sits barefoot for hours waiting to talk to a visitor from the United States. Silent. Stoic. Strong. She has been waiting 14 years for this moment. Since she and 42 people rode a boat for 15 days to escape Vietnam in February 1989. On day 10, they ran out of food and water. To survive, they had to drink their own urine. For five days. Her brother eventually made it to Montana. Her cousin made it to Garden Grove. She shows pictures of both.

"The cost of freedom is so high," she says. "Fifteen days on that boat, 14 years in Palawan - that's how much you pay for freedom."

She fights tears to get out the words that have stuck in her throat all these years.

"It isn't fair," she says, calmly folding her hands. "It isn't fair. I know that freedom costs a lot. If you want to have freedom, you have to sacrifice. The thought of freedom is what helped me overcome the pain."

Finally, she cannot hold back. Tears roll down her cheeks.

"I always pray to God, `Please, help my family get to the United States,'" she says. "Because we have paid a heavy price."

³⁹ T. Berg, “Vietnamese may finally make it to the U.S.,” *Orange County Register*, posted Dec 4 2004.

Becoming refugees at last – and the last symbol of an old argument

On the eve of the “29th anniversary of the fall of Saigon”, notes the *New York Times*, the U.S. State Department detailed an agreement that would offer to accept “the last of the Vietnamese boat people,” promising “generous refugee-screening standards” in order to speed up their resettlement.⁴⁰ This decision has the bipartisan support of Senators Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), and Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.). Harkening back to the rhetoric of post-Vietnam America, Brownback revives American valor in its commitment to meeting the obligations to the victims of a war it lost.

"After almost 30 years, the last of the refugees of the Vietnam War have a chance to build a stable future," he says, "This is an important moment for them, and an important symbol of the U.S. commitment to refugee protection and resettlement."

Thus, RVNs return to their earliest designation, boat people, recoup their refugee status, and await resettlement in the U.S. They have become, after 14 years, symbolic as the remnant of an American war now replaced by other wars, some of these doomed to fail.

CONCLUSION

This is an admittedly preliminary account of the many negotiations of one vulnerable, stateless community negotiating for stable identity in the midst of multiple global flows. They have many allies—the Roman Catholic church, the highest levels of the Philippine government, and overseas Vietnamese. But the allies themselves ultimately do not agree on the best route for citizenship. From 1979 to 1996, the remnant Vietnamese boat people did not stir the national imagination. But after 1996, Government intervention, the promise of permanent residency, and Vietville inspired among solons and the public, most a reflection on Filipino virtue and a national humanitarianism. Most interesting were the different representations of Vietnamese during their long *duree*. Given their different ends, Filipino journalists and their willing informants stressed the dignity, industry and deep gratitude of Vietnamese towards their Filipino supporters. There was in their tone a disappointment and yet a resolve to set roots in Philippine soil. The two

⁴⁰ M. Tran and M. Curtius, “Ordeal for Boat People May End” *New York Times*, 30 April 2004

American journalists represent Vietnamese as victims bearing unrelenting hardship. They are incontrovertibly refugees whose camp, though now widened to encompass the Philippines, is still an obstacle to their final destination: America.