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Latin Asian American city-making in the Global South: Lao Refugee Resettlement and the Emergence
of Southeast Asian Argentina in Misiones

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Jael Vizcarra

Committee in charge:

Professor Y en L e Espiritu, Chair
Professor Jos e I. Fust e
Professor Nancy Kwak
Professor Daphne Taylor-Garcia

2024

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University of California San Diego

2024

DEDICATION

To everyone who is told they “think too much,” those who “take things too seriously.” To all brimming with curiosity about the world and others, possessed by a spirit of rascuachismo and moved by the common good.

May the persistence, optimism, and fire within continue to animate you and yield a field full of colorful flowers for everyone to enjoy!

Y para mi semilla más preciada, P. E. Amilcar.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Latin Asian American city-making in the Global South: Lao Refugee Resettlement and the Emergence of Southeast Asian Argentina in Misiones

by

Jael Vizcarra

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Y  n L   Espiritu, Chair

This dissertation discusses the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program in Argentina, 1979-1982. It explores the process by which Posadas became the nucleus of Lao life in Argentina, highlighting important junctures in the transition from a resettlement policy mediated by the UNHCR and the Argentine Interior Ministry (1979-1982) to provincial-level management in Misiones. This work examines why and how Lao refugees made Posadas their home while situating the analysis in Hemispheric Asian American approaches to Asian immigration and racialization in contemporary Latin America.

INTRODUCTION Accounting for the Seeds

Posadas, Misiones Province, Argentina

Lao refugees first arrived to the city of Posadas on February 19, 1980 five years after Ho Chi Minh's National Liberation Front (NLF) entered Saigon and unified the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, officially declaring an end to the American War in Vietnam. An army of peasants without an air-force had defeated the military forces of a country possessing more than half the world's wealth.¹ The implications of the NLF's victory, and US defeat, extended beyond the geographical confines of Southeast Asia reverberating in the Global North and the Global South. In this dissertation, I present the case-study of displaced Lao refugees whom the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettled in the province of Misiones, Argentina and explore the ways refugee resettlement changed the urban fabric of Misiones' capital, Posadas, over the span of four decades. Lao refugees changed the urban landscape through what I term "city-making," the ways in which Lao people engaged in socially reproductive and productive activities in the city to claim their right to space in the city. Lao refugees are "unorganized urbanization producers," a term coined by David Harvey, and belong to the heterogeneous conglomerate of non-waged and marginalized workers who create value in cities.² In other words, city-making refers to the fruits of Lao refugee labor in its capacity to shape urban space through commercial activity, cultural celebrations, and community traditions which make Posadas an important place in Lao Argentine memory. Posadas is currently the only city in Argentina that boasts two Lao Buddhist temples, holds the

1 Howard Zinn, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 3.

2 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (NY: Verso, 2012), 130.

largest Lao festivities, and is the place most Lao in Argentina have either visited, temporarily lived in, or wish to eventually know. Upon returning to Argentina from contract work stints in the US, or work in provinces like Buenos Aires, Posadas remains the city Lao refugees know they can always return to and call home. For Lao refugees and their children, Posadas offers familiarity, tranquility and a much welcomed sense of community. To write about Lao Argentine history is also to write about the city of Posadas.

The city of Posadas is flanked by the Paraná River and connects to the Paraguayan commercial hub of Encarnacion through an international bridge that joins the two border cities. As with most border cities, unequal access to power and capital sets them apart from each other: Encarnacion remains a popular destination for Posadeños looking for cheaper deals, while Posadas remains a destination for Paraguayans looking for work. Posadas is the capital of the province of Misiones, a province nationally known for evocative subtropical landscapes and wild ranges of verdant hues laying atop *tierra colorada*—a fertile, iron-rich, brick-colored soil that sprouts vegetation with the slightest rain. To the world, Misiones is best known for hosting multiple UNESCO World Heritage sites like Iguazu Falls and the ruins of 17th century Jesuit missions.

To Argentines, Misiones is synonymous with the native Guarani populations who introduced the iconic yerba mate³ habit to criollos who⁴ transformed the province into the

3 Yerba mate (*ilex paraguariensis*) is a plant whose leaves are dried and brewed to prepare a bitter concoction beloved by millions in Argentina, southern Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. In Misiones, it is usually prepared cold and infused with herbs, *yuyos*, while the rest of Argentina brews it hot. It is sipped out of a gourd called a *mate* with the help of a *bombilla*, a thick metal straw that filters the crushed leaf brew.

4 Criollo is a term used in Argentina and Uruguay that carries contested cultural, racial, and spatial connotations. It is used to reference people with and without European ancestry born in the Americas. The Argentine criollo ethos is defined by ruggedness, austere simplicity, and an appreciation for nature—characteristics that are also associated with gaucho culture and provincial rurality. The term

heart of national yerba mate production. Misiones' name pays tribute to its missionary heritage, making the province a living example of settler-colonialism where the indigenous Guaraní populations have been relegated to historical memory in spite of their ubiquity. Eliding this reality of settler-colonialism, Misionero identity is presented as a blend—a *crisol de razas*, the Spanish equivalent to melting pot, consisting of German, Japanese, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian immigrants. This historically distinct migration pattern and local identity narrative sets Misiones apart from the predominantly Italian and Spanish migrations that define the urban, cosmopolitan character of other cities in Argentina. A main focus of this dissertation is analyzing the ambivalent status of Asian refugees and immigrants within the *crisol de razas* narrative, with particular attention to its implications for Lao racialization.

Over the span of four decades Lao refugees and their descendants have developed a sense of belonging in Posadas. Lao refugees were drawn to the city's arable land, subtropical climate, and fishing, while the city's informal living settlements made ad-hoc housing possible along with precarious forms of work. The city's geographical attributes struck an affective chord with Lao refugees, in particular its subtropical climate and proximity to the Paraná River evocative of the Mekong. The yearlong availability of familiar foods like mango, *mamón* (papaya), and *brote de tacuara* (bamboo shoots) gave Lao refugees a strong sense of familiarity in the city, in contrast to other Argentine

originally emerged in the colonial period to racially distinguish Spaniards born in the Americas from those born in Europe. Its contemporary usage in Argentina, however, has shifted and blurred. Unlike other Latin American countries, *mestizaje* ideologies were never institutionalized in Argentina. For this reason Argentines have come to also identify the term *criollo* as synthesizing an amalgamation of African, indigenous, and poor Spanish-settler cultures identified with provincial Argentina. Currently, cultural practices found in large cities are considered *criollas* if they embrace Argentine autochthonous syncretism over overtly Eurocentric practices. In my interviews, some Lao refugees and their children often referred to themselves as *criollos* when speaking about their current lives, showing the term's polyvalent meaning and contextual usage.

regions known for mountainous arid landscapes, endless pastures, or frigid temperatures.⁵ This dissertation delineates the process through which Posadas became the nucleus of Lao life in Argentina, highlighting important junctures in the transition from a frantic refugee resettlement policy mediated by the UNHCR and the Argentine Interior Ministry (1979-1982) to a provincial-level management that established Misiones as a defacto, long-term resettlement option for Lao refugees and their descendants. This discussion makes the protagonism of refugees visible in their making Posadas a permanent settlement city and identifies the socioeconomic conditions (and contingencies) which led to the community's permanent settlement in the province.

“And my mother took seeds with her...” Chanmali K.

The Saturday of February 10, 2018 was welcomed by a humid warmth that hovered until noon. It was Boun Phatamphi,⁶ an annual gathering that brings Lao together at the *Colonia Laosiana* to celebrate the Lunar New Year. Colonia Laosiana literally translates to Laotian Colony and was established between 1984-1985 through a UN land grant. It was the first Lao neighborhood to be formally recognized in what was then the outskirts of Posadas. The Colonia Laosiana initially consisted of twenty houses for twenty families, twenty hectares of arable land, and a temple. Every family was allotted a hectare for planting crops. The reference to “colony” is a legacy of Misionero settler-

5 In addition to the province of Misiones, the provinces of Buenos Aires and Rio Negro are home to many Lao refugees and second-generation Lao. In particular, the cities of Buenos Aires, Chascomus, Ranchos, and Rojas (located in the province of Buenos Aires) host a sizeable Lao community. Aside from Posadas, Rojas is the only other city with a Lao Buddhist temple.

6 My interlocutors referred to the celebration as Boun Phatamphi. Posadeña ethnographer Romina Zulpo's master's thesis about Lao refugees in Posadas identifies the fest as Boun Todhs Faak Fha (Romina Elena Zulpo, “Memoria e Identidad. Del Sudeste de Asia a Posadas” (Masters thes., Universidad Nacional de Misiones, 2012), 73.

colonial history. Settlements of Asian and Eastern European immigrants in Argentina continue to be referred to as *colonias* in Misiones when these are located in peri-urban or rural areas. Drove of cars arrived to the Colonia throughout this Saturday afternoon notwithstanding the ongoing drizzle. Perfectly timed, the rainfall ended by nightfall when food vending kicked off and plates of Lao food began circulating around the tables. Soon after dinner, a man plugged his keyboard into an amplifier at 9pm, checked the microphone, and began singing karaoke. The party continued well onto dawn and in some households the celebration carried on for a week as the festivity provided the rare opportunity to meet with Lao residing in far off provinces.

2018's Boun Phathamphi was preceded by special planning. Throughout 2017 many Lao in Posadas worked diligently to ensure the timely completion of the concrete Buddha resting in front of the Colonia's main entrance. The Lao community in Posadas also facilitated the immigration paperwork of the two resident Lao monks present for the celebration. The Lao of Posadas extended an invitation to Lao refugees throughout Argentina and abroad in anticipation of the Buddha's inauguration, but despite their collective efforts the Buddha was not completed on time for Boun Phathamphi. Instead, plans for completion were postponed until February 2020 to commemorate Lao refugees' fortieth-year anniversary in Argentina. Nevertheless, the Colonia welcomed approximately a thousand *paisanos*⁷ who arrived in the middle of summer showers to embark on a week-long festivity.

7 The Spanish word *paisano* refers to a person from the same place/country of origin and it has a friendly connotation. It is a term that my interlocutors used and preferred when talking about other Lao in Argentina and abroad. In Lao usage, the term *paisano* emphasizes their shared country of origin instead of ethnic or religious differences, and/or regional origin. My usage in the dissertation reflects Lao usage.

A week after Boun Phatamphi, I visited Seng's⁸ house located one kilometer away from the Colonia Laosiana along Ruta 12, the national highway connecting the provinces of Misiones and Buenos Aires. Seng (61) and his wife Vatsana (59) live in a two-story home where the tv in the living room was always tuned to RT News when I visited, and Seng liked to talk to me about international current events. Because he has cataracts and does not see well at night, Seng spends most of the daylight hours tending to his two-hectare field at the Colonia Laosiana where he grows ginger, taro root, and peanuts. We first met a month before Boun Phatamphi when he showed me his field and told me about a recent fire that burned most of his farming tools. Seng invited me to his home after because he wanted to show me the house he spent years building, one room at a time, with the help of his son's remittances from Baltimore, MD. Seng told me he designed the house but that it belongs to his oldest son. Seng and Vatsana's oldest son and daughter left Posadas for the US in the late 1990s during a second-generation exodus to the US during a brief period of liberal visa policies between Argentina and the US. Seng continues to await his children's return and says that if they do, it will likely be a permanent one as they are undocumented in the US.

On this occasion, Seng asked me to come over to his home to meet his close friend, a woman named Chanthadeth (64) who visited Posadas from the faraway Neuquen province to attend Boun Phatamphi. Like him, Chanthadeth is Catholic and from the same town in southern Khammouane province; though they first met in Argentina. As I will discuss later, Lao refugees and their descendants have gotten used to receiving attention from strangers who are journalists, film-makers, and, like me,

8 All names are pseudonyms and have been changed to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

university researchers. I was often asked if I was working for a newspaper or a television channel, and at other times, if I worked for the United Nations. Chanthadeth was no different and immediately asked me what I was doing there. As with other paisanos, she was surprised to learn that I had traveled from California to Posadas to interview refugees about resettlement and life in Argentina. After establishing who I was, where I was from, and what I was doing there, Lao refugees often asked me my ethnicity and what city in California I came from. Since many in their extended family were resettled in the US, refugees talked to me about their family members working in California's agricultural fields or doing construction work alongside Mexican immigrants. Chanthadeth's mother and sister lived in Fresno and she told me she also has family in Minnesota and Washington. Her US relatives visited Misiones in 2004 to attend her son's wedding to a Lao woman from Obera, Posadas' neighboring city. She has not had the opportunity to visit her relatives in the US, nor has plans to.

That Friday afternoon in Seng's house, I sat beside Chanthadeth in the dining room table while Vatsana came and went from the kitchen. Seng sat at the head of the table and looked outside to the street. I put the voice recorder on the table and opened with the usual: date, location of interview, asked for my interlocutor's name and last name, place of birth in Laos, date of birth, date of arrival in Argentina, inquired about the Argentine provinces they had lived and worked in, asked about the jobs they held in Argentina, memories about their earlier years in the country, and about their current lives and occupations. My interlocutors traveled to distinct places in their memory when asked these questions, making the beginning of each oral history similar yet with varied endings that underscored their singular life trajectories. Although Chanthadeth had never lived in

Misiones, she visited the province whenever she could to reunite with her in-laws in the neighboring city and friends whom she considered family. The celebration of Boun Phatamphi offers Lao refugees who live in faraway provinces the opportunity to visit their chosen family in Posadas every year. Such yearly pilgrimage cements the city's reputation as a nucleus of Lao community, identity, and history in Argentina, regardless of people's religious affiliation. Indeed, over the last four decades the Colonia Laosiana has become a pilgrimage site for Buddhist, Catholic, and Evangelical Christian Lao.

Before arriving to Seng's house in Posadas, Chanthadeth traveled from Neuquen to Buenos Aires to meet Chanmali. Chanmali, a second-generation Lao woman in her mid-30s, drove northeast with Chanthadeth and her own family. Chanmali lives in the province of Buenos Aires with her Argentine husband and two pre-adolescent boys. The daughter of two Lao refugees, Chanmali belongs to the Misiones-born second-generation who came of age in the 1990s.

Chanmali was born and raised in the city of Wanda located four hours away from Posadas, and her family moved to Posadas in 1997. They moved into a one-room shed in the now underwater riverside neighborhood of El Brete, a place where the majority of Lao refugees lived throughout the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. Due to a lack of job prospects in Posadas, Chanmali's family eventually moved to the province of Buenos Aires looking for better work opportunities. Relocation to the province of Buenos Aires was a common trajectory among those resettled in Posadas who wanted more stable employment and a steady source of income, which was not always guaranteed in Posadas. In the chapters that follow, I examine the importance of the initial Wanda

refugee settlements in the province of Misiones and their significance in establishing Misiones as a provincial paragon of “successful” Lao resettlement.

By centering Lao accounts of resettlement in Misiones I provide a counter history that highlights the significance of El Brete—the first unofficial Lao settlement in Posadas— as fundamental for understanding the relationships and tensions that emerged over time between Lao refugees and the powerful private institution known as Yacyretá Binational Entity, EBY⁹ in the Spanish acronym. The EBY, a binational organization managed by both Argentine and Paraguayan officials, operated and executed plans for the Yacyretá hydroelectric Dam (1973) whose reservoir slowly swallowed the entirety of El Brete. The Yacyretá dam is a large-scale development project that uses water from the Paraná River to generate energy for Argentina and Paraguay. The Yacyretá Dam’s man-made reservoir displaced over 50,000 people, including Lao refugees. Inadvertently, the EBY played a key role in fomenting long-term Lao settlement in Posadas by providing homes to Lao refugees as indemnity for flooding the neighborhood of El Brete.

As I wrapped up my interview with Chanthadeth, Chanmali walked into the house with her husband and two kids. She stood by listening to Chanthadeth and, unprompted, began to tell me a story she often heard in her childhood:

*Mi papá siempre nos contaba de cómo salieron (de Laos).
Eso es pa’ no olvidarse viste, para saber cómo llegaron a
Tailandia. Nos contaba que mi mamá estaba embarazada
de 7 meses, de mi hermana la segunda, y tenía a mi
hermana la mayor de tres años. Tuvieron que salir,*

9 Entidad Binacional Yacyretá

salieron en un grupo pequeño a escondidas. Cruzaron toda la montaña para llegar al refugio. Dice que él llevo, se trajo tres o cuatro libros de él, viste, de arreglar la tele, todas esas cosas, se trajo esos libros. Y mi mamá trajo semillas...de plantas, de verduras. Es lo único que cargaron, era lo más preciado sabes.

My dad always told us about how they left (Laos). That's something that can't be forgotten, you see. To know how they got to Thailand. He'd tell us that my mom was 7 months pregnant with my second sister, and my oldest sister was with them, she was three years old. They had to leave, they left clandestinely with a small group. They crossed the mountain to reach the refuge. He said that he took, he brought, three or four books of his, you see, to fix TV's and such, he brought those books. And my mother took seeds with her...of plants and vegetables. It's all they carried, it was the most valuable, you know.¹⁰

Chanmali's anecdote about her parents reflects a stubborn will to live that projected a future in which the family would once again sow seeds and make a living. As singular as this intergenerational story of displacement is, it is also a poignant snapshot of a collective experience shared by millions of displaced Southeast Asians. Vijay Prashad

10 Interview excerpts have all been translated from Spanish to English by me.

(2018) argues that there are no refugees only *people* who have been forced from their homes. Further elaborating this important distinction and its refusal to subsume the travails endured by millions of people by diluting the cruelty of displacement, militarism, and forced migration and softening the blow with the anonymous category of *refugee*, I show how, when, where, and under what conditions people remake *home* in new places, carrying only a handful of seeds and repair manuals.¹¹

Forty Years of Lao History in Argentina

This dissertation is intellectually anchored in Transnational Ethnic Studies and is situated at the intersections of Critical Immigration and Refugee Studies, Hemispheric Asian American Studies, Latin American Studies, and Urban Studies. The questions that guide my research pivot around two main concerns and I rely on the figure of the refugee as an analytical lens to inquire into the processes that generate conditions of displacement and emplacement, rather than situating the refugee as a pitiable figure to be prodded and dissected to verify its suffering. I ask: *What socio-political and economic conditions have structured Lao refugee lives in Argentina in the last forty years? And, in which ways have Lao refugees and their descendants transformed the spaces, places, and cities they inhabit in Argentina?*

To answer these questions I look to the metaphorical fruits yielded by the seeds refugee women carried with them from Laos to Argentina. Seeds like the ones Chanmali's mother carried in the folds of her skirt represent vitality, continuity, and a

11 Vijay Prashad "There is No Refugee Crisis. There is Only a Crisis of Humanity," The Tricontinental Institute, 29th Newsletter, published September 14, 2018, <https://www.thetricontinental.org/newsletterissue/there-is-no-refugee-crisis-there-is-only-a-crisis-of-humanity-the-twenty-ninth-newsletter-2018/>.

cyclical sense of time that weaves together the present and the past while also acknowledging the periods of light and darkness that seeds abide by. In other words, thinking about refugee settlement through the metaphor of seeds brings attention to the people who planted the seeds of community through their labor, and also reorients the focus to the processes through which Lao refugees took root in Posadas.

Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement and the Junta

In writing about the forty years of Lao history in Argentina I discuss the complex assemblage that shapes a Lao Argentine trajectory that is simultaneously embedded in global, national, and local contexts. The Argentine Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program (1979-1982) is an example of the global reach of American and European imperialist wars in Southeast Asia through its entanglement with Argentine statecraft during the Cold War. As this dissertation shows, Lao refugee resettlement is an often overlooked, if not unknown, episode of the Argentine military dictatorship period (1976-1983). The dictatorship era was characterized by state terrorism and the disappearance of up to 30,000 civilians, and a politically repressive and socially violent neoliberal economic program rooted in anti-communism, along with the glorification of an ultra-conservative right-wing strand of Catholicism.^{12 13} The application of neoliberal economic policies in Argentina initiated a process of deindustrialization that rerouted the national economy towards finance capital. Additionally, the junta also implemented diverse policies of urban renewal in Buenos Aires and urbanized its provinces by

12 Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (New York Oxford University Press, 2014).

13 Patricia Marchak, *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).

investing in large-scale development projects as a means to modernize. This led, for example, to urban renewal schemes that included the mass eviction and destruction of the *villa miserias*, or slums, surrounding Buenos Aires. Thousands of the city's poorest residents were forcibly evicted to make room for highways, clearing important and longstanding working poor urban settlements. In a province like Misiones located in the northeast region of the country, neoliberal urbanization translated into large-scale development projects such as the Yacyretá Dam. The Argentine military junta touted the hydroelectric Yacyretá Dam that straddles Corrientes and Misiones as "*la Obra del Siglo*"— the Work of the Century. In this way, the lives of Lao refugees were shaped by both Argentine international relations and the junta's nation-building and modernizing efforts.

Since this connection is not readily apparent in the history of Lao refugee resettlement in Argentina, the Yacyretá Dam is not incorporated to narratives about Lao refugee resettlement because it is seen as a separate process. The dam's construction, however, is not only one of the dictatorship's "crown jewels," emblematic of the junta's neoliberal approach to urbanization, it is also key to explaining longterm refugee resettlement in the Misiones region due the direct negotiations the EBY entered with Lao refugees to offer housing when it was time to fill the dam's reservoir (and in the process, flood the neighborhood of El Brete.)

Lastly, I argue that Lao refugee resettlement visibilizes Argentina's deepening ties with Asia in the late 20th century. At the time, these ties functioned as a strategy to court additional sources of capital and labor to break the hold of Cold War bipolarity. In

this sense, my dissertation reframes the junta period as one where a novel, if contradictory, racial project begins to emerge. After a series of diplomatic visits and agreements with East Asia, the Argentine dictatorship set the foundation for future demographic shifts that included an increase in East Asian capital investment and new waves of immigrant labor from Asia into Argentina. This move significantly departed from Argentina's historical reliance on European immigrant labor in the late 19th and early 20th century as a means to modernize the nation. While in power, the dictatorship encouraged Asian investment from China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Forty years later, China is now an established trade partner in Argentina (and throughout the region). In other words, one of this dissertation's major contributions is situating the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program as part of a broader effort that looked to Asian immigration as a means to supply a labor pool for small agricultural enterprises located in "underpopulated" provinces. I tackle the conception of refugees as refugee-workers in chapter two and discuss their labor actions in response to the exploitation they encountered in Argentina.

Refugee-workers and Militarized Humanitarianism

The Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement program, in particular, functioned as an unofficial labor recruitment strategy by harnessing refugee labor under the blanket of humanitarian concerns. The refugee as refugee-worker was both materially and ideologically expedient to the Argentina Junta. Framing refugee resettlement as humanitarianism is part of what Argentine social scientist Julia Risler (2018) has termed "*la acción psicológica de la dictadura*," which refers to the dictatorship's careful

circulation of propaganda through the media in order to portray itself as a moral nation.¹⁴ The military relied on national surveys collected by Argentine and US-based publicity firms like Burson Marsteller to gauge public opinion and to help determine its future public relations campaigns. These PR campaigns heavily relied on positive, relatable, and humanizing representations of the military's policies to generate a sense of well-being and consensus amid a domestic social war. One of the Junta's most infamous campaigns took place on September 1979, the same month that the first contingent of refugees arrived to the country. The Junta's September campaign purposely coincided with the arrival of refugees and an important visit from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comision Inter-Americana de Derechos Humanos, CIDH). The organization had waited over a year for permission to enter the country and the Argentine government reluctantly approved the CIDH's visit under mounting international pressure, particularly from the US. The first Lao refugee contingent arrived to the Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires on September 14, 1979, concurrent with the CIDH visit (September 6-20, 1979). From this visit, the CIDH published a well-known report in April 1980 which summarized their damning findings of the grave and systematic human rights abuses perpetrated by the junta.¹⁵

During the CIDH's fact-finding mission, the junta airdropped 250,000 stickers throughout Buenos Aires emblazoned with the phrase "*Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos*" against the backdrop of an Argentine flag ("We Argentines are humane and law-abiding"). The Spanish version indexes the noun *derechos humanos*, human rights, to

14 Julia Risler, *La Acción Psicológica: Dictadura, inteligencia y gobierno de las emociones 1955-1981* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón 2018).

15 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States, "*Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina*," 11/4/1980.

equate Argentina with human rights. In Posadas, local newspapers relied on similar campaigns in preparation for the arrival of Lao refugees, disseminating posters with images of suffering and despairing Southeast Asians with headlines such as, “They will smile again. Lend them your hand, they need it,” and, “They risked their lives seeking work, peace, and freedom. Argentina will give them work, peace, and freedom. Misionero, lend them your hand.” To this day, most accounts of Lao refugee resettlement note the obvious contradiction in the dictatorship’s militarized humanitarianism but fail to situate the program in relationship to the junta’s broader economic and urbanization policies. By eluding the junta’s pursuit of stronger ties with Asian countries at the time of refugee resettlement, the presence of Asian immigrants in contemporary Argentina appears random and ahistorical.

A Lao Argentine Posadas: Refugee city-making

I use a multi-scalar approach when recounting Lao Argentine history in Posadas to avoid portraying the practices of refugees as either self-constitutive or overly-structured by external forces. To do this, I write about emplacement to capture the relationship between refugees, place, and the city of Posadas. The concept of emplacement refers to “the restructuring of a city within networks of power and urban dwellers’ efforts to settle and build networks of connection,” which allows me to identify the specific constraints and opportunities present in Posadas at the moment of Lao refugee resettlement.¹⁶ Additionally, a multi-scalar approach to city-making echoes what sociologists Ayse Caglar and Nina Glick Schiller (2018) advocate for in research that

16 Ayse Caglar, “Still ‘migrants’ after all those years: foundational mobilities, temporal frames and emplacement of migrants,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, 6 (2016): 961.

centers migrants, displaced people, and urban regeneration. Caglar and Glick Schiller write about the role of migrants in *disempowered cities* like Posadas, cities that lack the economic, cultural, and political power of more renowned Argentine cities (such as Buenos Aires, Cordoba, and Mendoza) to move beyond accounts that overemphasize global cities and urban powerhouses.¹⁷ A multi-scalar approach does not limit the analysis of social life and processes within the bounds of the nation-state while remaining simultaneously attuned to the influences of the local and the global on social phenomena. In my work, I consider the influence that local and global forces exert in the trajectory of refugee settlement in Posadas. By thinking about refugee city-making I look to the ways that refugees contribute to value-creation in cities like Posadas in their shaping of disempowered city landscapes. I specifically look to their use of space and the ways they create place and value.

Caglar and Schiller challenge those of us interested in everyday life to remain attentive to the multi-scalar components of migrants' city-making practices in disempowered cities by critiquing methodological nationalism—the assumption that nation-state boundaries, state-reach, and cultural homogeneity are natural and uncontested features of the nation-state. For example, some immigration studies assume that non-migrants only identify with one country and that they possess a national identity that migrants and refugees bring into tension. Assuming that migrants are a destabilizing force to non-migrants leads to an overemphasis on ethnicity, culture, and class as explanatory categories for migration experiences, often under the deficiency-based rhetoric of integration and/or assimilation. When emphasizing ethnicity and culture, the

17 Ayse Caglar and Nina Glick Schiller, *Migrants and City-Making: Dispossession, Displacements, and Urban Regeneration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 13.

role of urbanity is dismissed though it is a significant frame through which the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality structure migrant social difference. In this work, I do not define urbanity strictly as pertaining to cities and the collective imaginary conjured and indexed by referents of the “city” (usually Western metropolises and global cities.) I agree with Deljana Iossifova, Alexandros Gasparatos, and Christopher N.H. Doll (2017) that the city is a subset of the urban condition, and conceptualize the urban as a unit of analysis, an analytical tool, and a process that needs to be teased out and delineated as it presents itself in our respective research sites and, in this case, in the context of displacement.¹⁸ Migration scholarship, and refugee research by extension, tends to regard the global city (mostly American or European: New York, London, Paris) as the site where the most interesting processes pertaining to migrant and displaced populations take place. In studying Lao refugee settlements in the disempowered city of Posadas, I offer an interesting case study of refugee city-making that takes place in a rural-urban hybrid border town *located in the Global South* in a historical moment when most of the world’s population is urban and does not reside in American or European cities. A 2016 Amnesty International report underlined the importance of the Global South as host to the world’s refugee populations: Only ten of the world’s 193 countries host more than half of the global refugee population and all ten are located in the Global South.¹⁹ As such, the Global South is a productive site for understanding population movements in the neoliberal era because it is the destination of the majority of the world’s migrant and refugee populations. It borders common-sense to argue that urban

18 Deljana Iossifova, Christopher N.H. Doll, and Alexandros Gasparatos, eds., *Defining the Urban* (London: Routledge 2017), 287-288.

19 Amnesty International. *Tackling the Global Refugee Crisis: From shirking to sharing responsibility*. October 2016. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/4905/2016/en/>

contexts outside of Europe and the US produce different outcomes in relation to migrant settlement and city-making because these locations are subject to conditions not present in the Global North. Aside from the obvious problems of generalizing the conditions of migrants and displaced people living in the urban Global North to other parts of the world, the most significant problem with generalizing migration research conclusions stems from the way they transpose a set of defined problems and conflicts to the rest of the world. Transposing problems from one context to another assumes that the same set of social conflicts accompany migrants and refugees living outside of American and European urbanity. This tendency reinstates the global city and the metropole as privileged locations from which to think about contemporary population movements in the neoliberal era, heralding the superiority of the Global North vis-a-vis the South, and enacting colonial tropes that characterize complexity as inherently an American or European property. Thinking about urbanity in a unidimensional way reduces the complexity of social phenomena in the rest of the world and subsumes the South in colonial catch-all categories of tradition, backwardness, and underdevelopment.

Beyond Integration and Assimilation: Neoliberalism from Below

In their origins, migration and refugee studies emphasized immigrant integration and assimilation by often relying on classist, racialized gendered tropes to explain individual and group differences in class mobility. Urban studies, on the other hand, generally treats heterogeneity and migration as a feature of cosmopolitan cities—what Caglar and Schiller call urban “powerhouses” given their symbolic and material weight in the urban imaginary and global economy. A multi-scalar vista of Lao city-making in

Posadas, a border city with disempowered city traits, challenges the assumption that only global cities hold a monopoly over migration and that cosmopolitan features are only found in urban powerhouses. A multi-scalar approach also helps me treat the urban as a useful analytical tool for situating Lao history in Posadas. As urban historian Nancy Kwak (2017) explains, “[S]pace is not considered as fact but rather as physical form constructed in complex ways and embodying different meanings to specific actors through varied experiences.”²⁰ Lao city-making imbues space with meaning and value through practices that lead to emplacement, granting Posadas a special place in their resettlement history in Argentina. Furthermore, by offering the city of Posadas as a case study, I detail forms of urbanity in the Global South that reflect a changing relation between Asia and Latin America while showing the global histories that are visible from this hybrid, rural-urban border city. This dissertation depicts a model of urbanity whereby Lao refugees produce place in neoliberal Posadas through their informal economic activities and local traditions which are tied to their occupations in niche sectors of the regional economy. Lastly, Posadas’s status as a border city is historically significant and it has helped define the boundaries of the Argentine nation-state vis-a-vis longstanding rivalries with the regional hegemon, Brazil, as well as with neighboring Paraguay.

In highlighting refugee city-making practices, this dissertation conceptualizes the disempowered city of Posadas as the site from which “to speak about the multiple ongoing connected processes and relationships of urban restructuring, regeneration, and

20 Nancy Kwak, “Understanding ‘urban’ from the disciplinary viewpoint of history,” in *Defining the Urban*, eds., Deljana Iossifova, Christopher N.H. Doll and Alexandros Gasparatos (London: Routledge, 2017), 54.

rebranding as they develop through space and over time.”²¹ This city-making perspective redirects our attention to the way that urbanization and migration interact and are influenced by global, neoliberal capital flows, especially in border zones like Posadas. The uneven, exploitative, and extractive character of neoliberalism is not unique to the neoliberal capitalist form; it is predated, structured, and inherited from the colonial foundations of the modern world. Nevertheless, the process of neoliberal inclusion into the market and into the nation relies on a different set of ideological and material practices that differ from its colonial predecessors and need to be analyzed on the ground. This is not to claim that colonial forms of exclusion no longer exist. On the contrary, the presence of these forms is mediated through neoliberal policies and practices and the entanglements that arise from the coexistence of both “older” and “newer” forms of social exploitation necessitate exploration and analysis. This work tackles the neoliberal form specifically to define its relationship with the urban and the role of urban development in further stratifying neoliberalism’s “inclusive” logic in relation to refugee city-making.

In emphasizing city-making and neoliberalism, however, I do not privilege an overly-structural way of seeing that removes the role of contingency and conjuncture in influencing the everyday practices of refugees. Overly-structural analyses tend to situate social actors as passive, powerless, and/or reactive to structures from above leaving less room for social actors’ desires, interests, and expressions of agency. This dissertation’s city-making perspective incorporates the viewpoint of Lao refugees and their descendants beyond the academic binary of resistance and submission.

21 Ayse Caglar and Nina Glick Schiller, *Migrants and City-Making: Dispossession, Displacements, and Urban Regeneration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 11.

Seeing from below accounts for macro processes without reducing social life to a planned imposition from above that presents power as coherent and all-encompassing. Seeing from below challenges the indifference and apathy reserved for the lives of ordinary and marginalized people whose practices (re)produce, change, and undermine the top-down rationalities that shape refugee resettlement programs and urban development policies in the Global South. A top-down perspective cannot see how marginalized people appropriate and re-purpose resources in ways that do not necessarily further imperatives imposed from above. Marginalized people's practices can and do sometimes exceed the neoliberal rationalities exacted on them by states and other powerful entities. An example from mid-1990s Argentina comes to mind. Former president Carlos Menem, remembered for deepening neoliberal reforms initiated during the military dictatorship, departed from previous administrations by declaring an allegiance to the Washington Consensus. This move was in stark opposition to the dictatorship's fervent anti-Americanism fueled by Cold War aspirations for Argentine regional hegemony and dominance.²² During this period marked by a transition to democracy and friendly Argentine-US relations, the US granted reciprocity visas that allowed Argentines to travel to the US without a tourist visa, bypassing an excruciatingly long and expensive visa application process. Many Lao refugees and second-generation Lao became Argentine nationals in this period as a means to obtain passports to travel to the US and overstay the three-month tourist visa. In so doing, the Lao strategically used the privileges of Argentine nationality to reunite with extended family and tap into circuits abroad that offered many refugees temporary jobs which enabled them to earn

22 Paul Zagorski, "Civil-Military Relations and Argentine Democracy: The Armed Forces under the Menem Government," *Armed Forces and Society* 20, 3 (1994): 426.

valuable remittance dollars. This re-purposing of the Argentine passport under neoliberal conditions of chronic unemployment in Argentina shows that the neoliberal premise of a borderless world for elites and capital simultaneously produces a precarized avatar where the mobility of the underprivileged, though restricted and policed, becomes a necessity. The mobility imperative stems from neoliberal precarization, a process characterized by the flexibilization of labor markets which creates job insecurity and increases income uncertainty for the vast majority of the world's poorest population. It is the result of capital transferring risk to workers through the proliferation of informal and temporary jobs that place the onus of social reproduction and surplus production onto the working poor while absolving employers from the responsibility of reproducing the labor force.²³ This underbelly of globalization does not operate outside the logic of neoliberal conditions; it exists in a dialectical relationship to top-down, technocratic worldviews. Resource repurposing at the hands of the most marginalized constitutes a precarized modality of neoliberalism from below—the stigmatized and criminalized practices of common people that also make the world turn.

Neoliberalism from below frames my analysis of Lao city-making practices. The conditions of refugee resettlement since Lao arrival in 1979 during the military dictatorship (1976-1983) have been structured by the junta's violent imposition of the neoliberal project that only intensified in the years that followed Argentina's transition to democracy. In her theorizations about the feminized and immigrant-powered informal economies in the urban periphery of Buenos Aires, Argentine political scientist Veronica Gago disputes the idea that neoliberalism can be reduced to a top-down economic

23 Martin Bak Jorgensen. "Precariat-- What it Is and Isn't-- Towards an Understanding of What it Does," *Critical Sociology* 42, 7-8 (2016): 961.

philosophy and practice, arguing that a modality of neoliberalism from below is present in *baroque economies*—the massive, popular informal economies emerging out of dispossessive neoliberal conditions that adapt to and derail “the unidimensionality of the neoliberal competitive form.”²⁴ Neoliberalism from below entails an ambivalent subjectivity that transforms subjects into precarious strategists who must turn to calculation as a form of living, but not as a reincarnation of rational-choice theory nor a mirror-reflection of the top-down neoliberal rationality that characterizes global institutions and organizations known for dispensing policy cocktails of privatization, deregulation, flexibilization, and precarity. Neoliberalism from below is philosophically anchored in a *vitalist pragmatic*—the premise that human action is also a manifestation of desire, not reducible nor bound to economic rational choice. It arises from people’s encounters with neoliberal forces at work and is embodied by the various subjectivities and tactics of everyday life that exist at the margins of what is formally recognized as neoliberalism from above. The vitalist pragmatic turns calculation and everyday strategy into “a vital condition in a context where the state does not guarantee the conditions of neoliberal competition prescribed by the ordoliberal model.”²⁵ Additionally, Gago maintains that “neoliberalism survives as a set of conditions that are manifested from above, as the renewal of the extractive-dispossessive form in a new moment of financIALIZED sovereignty and, from below, as a rationality that negotiates profits in this context of dispossession, in a contractual dynamic that mixes forms of servitude and

24 Veronica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3.

25 Veronica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.

conflict.”²⁶ This uneasy dynamic of servitude and conflict generated by forms of neoliberal extraction and dispossession interests me because it is also present in what Ethnic Studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu terms *differential inclusion* in the US context of neoliberal multiculturalism. Differential inclusion identifies the simultaneity of old and new forms of subjugation, the “old” representing settler-colonial and imperial modalities which produce forms of nation-based exclusion through the criminalization, marginalization, and disavowal of people according to racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed forms of difference in the context of colonial conquest. Under neoliberalism, marginalization occurs through the inverse logic of inclusion that promises to extend previously denied privileges, such as citizenship, to formerly colonized, excluded, and othered subjects. In the context of post-Cold War global population movements and displacement, differential inclusion counters myths of “voluntary” immigration and emphasizes the politics of how “different groups are “included,” yet simultaneously legally subordinated, economically exploited, or culturally degraded, often in relation to one another.”²⁷ In writing about four decades of Lao Argentine history, I underline the ambivalent, indeterminate character of neoliberalism from below in the city-making practices of Lao refugees and their descendants, including their informal economic activities, by looking at the ways Lao refugees deploy a vitalist pragmatic to assert constrained forms of autonomy under neoliberal forms of differential inclusion in the border city of Posadas, moving beyond the paradigm of resistance or acquiescence to produce what I call Latin Asian American urbanity.

26 Veronica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

27 Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe and Lisa Yoneyama, “Transpacific Entanglements,” in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University, 2018), 184.

Critical Refugee Studies and the Vitalist Pragmatic

Gago's concept of the vitalist pragmatic is important for my analysis of city-making practices because I conceptualize these practices as outcomes of a subjectivity and rationality emerging from a neoliberalism from below, motivated by desires that exceed neoliberalism from above. I situate refugee acts in a vitalist pragmatic because it questions representations that treat marginalized people in general, and refugees in particular, as traumatized objects of intervention. In line with the field of Critical Refugee Studies, I dispute academic representations that reproduce refugees as objects of inquiry, to be dissected, tested for authenticity, and whose traumatic experiences need to be disassembled and exhibited for consumption by academic, governmental, and non-governmental institutions. Espiritu contends that refugee representations overwhelmingly rely on the image of a victimized, desperate, pathetic refugee at the expense of situating "refugee flight within its global political-economic and cultural context."²⁸ Espiritu and Gago invite us to question voyeuristic studies of marginalized populations by focusing on the specific constellations of power, exploitation, and domination that produce conditions of despair and that also give rise to social action. Likewise, both Espiritu and Gago suggest that marginalized people's visions, worldviews, and practices merit attention in our intellectual reckonings with power.

As an interdisciplinary project, this dissertation relies on oral histories as an epistemological tool to reflect Lao refugee subjectivity. I am, however, interested in something more than direct experience to make visible a tracing of the interplay of

28 Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, 1-2 (2006): 423.

scales— the non-linear, multi-directional feedback loops that tie the personal to the local, regional, national, and global. The actors and forces discussed in the context of four decades of Lao Argentine history carry uneven weight and have had different levels of influence in the process of Lao settlement in Misiones. I have taken care to represent people’s lives as outcomes of their personal desires and life’s inherent dynamism and contingency, not linear accounts that portray lived trajectories as predetermined, or inevitable outcomes of grand sociological theory, urban planning schemes, or master plans of mysterious powerful forces. As difficult as this task is, it is driven by a desire to center the humanity of people’s lives while also understanding that actions, decisions, and choices are always constrained by forces that are not always immediately visible. Thus, this dissertation does not purport or claim to reveal an innate, essentialist truth about the experiences of Lao refugees in Argentina, or about Latin Asian America in general. *It speaks with refugees, not for them.* I show that Lao refugees are city-makers, historically-situated agents in contemporary Argentina who have reshaped the urban localities they inhabit through concrete practices that require deeper analysis, reflection, and definition. In the seminal 2008 *Afro-Hispanic Review* special edition dedicated to Afro-Asian encounters vis-a-vis Latin America Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen Lopez aptly summarized that the history of Latin Asian America, “is a history that has been largely hidden in plain sight [...]”²⁹

Lao Argentine history exemplifies a neoliberalism from below that makes the connections between neoliberal urban development and refugee resettlement, informal economies, and racialized immigrant labor in 21st century Argentina visible. Importantly,

29 Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, 1 (2008): 10.

Lao Argentine history opens a prescient conversation about Asian Argentina specifically and expands an ongoing conversation about Latin Asian America—or Asian Latin America as hemispheric Asian American interdisciplinary scholars have termed the study of Asian-Latin American connections. In writing about Lao history as part of Argentine history, I do not vindicate a methodologically nationalist interpretation of history. Quite the contrary, this dissertation questions whether Argentine foundational myths about a European settler national identity are useful in understanding the demographic, social, political, economic, and cultural realities present in the country. Using Lao as a modifier of ‘Argentine history’ is my way of acknowledging that othered histories exist alongside that which is often opaquely referred to as “Argentine”.³⁰

Another important contribution of my dissertation is to denaturalize the construction of Asia and Latin America as two distinct cultural identities. Race and nation in Latin America are historically situated, and as historian Mark Overmyer-Velazquez (2017) writes, “[R]ace and nation are mutually constructed over time in relation to domestic and extra-national others: minority populations (e.g., indigenous and foreign communities) that upset the idea of national racial purity.”³¹ By highlighting a neoliberal subjectivity from below and embedding it in broader structures of power, I show that Lao presence in Posadas pushes official narratives about Argentine nationhood to their limit. I do so by critically juxtaposing the construction of the military dictatorship’s Work of the Century, the Yacyretá Dam, with Lao refugee resettlement and show how both were intimately connected well before the arrival of the refugees. Indeed,

30 My interlocutors did not refer to their history as Lao Argentine, this is my ascription.

31 Mark Overmyer-Velazquez, “Centering and De-Centering the Latin(o) American Migrant: Transnational and Comparative Race Formation in the Americas,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, 2 (2017): 84.

Argentina's decision to accept refugees enabled the construction of the dam by enabling the Argentine government to present a humane face internationally as a precondition to securing a loan from the Export Import Bank to purchase needed turbines from the US. As the Jimmy Carter administration exerted pressure on Argentina through an arms embargo, and as the international community denounced Argentine human rights abuses, the junta was able to benefit in multiple ways from accepting the resettlement of Lao refugees in exchange for dam turbines, the promise of cheapened labor, and a more favorable national and international image.

Lao refugees eventually settled in an area of Posadas flooded by the Yacyretá Dam's reservoir, the poor, riverbank neighborhood of El Brete. Both the Yacyretá Dam and the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program represent nation-building projects that make visible the fractures of Argentine state power, demonstrating that Eurocentric notions of Argentineness cannot be sustained under close scrutiny, and that urban development projects are one of the modalities through which the state produces legibility of people and spaces in an urban, neoliberal border context. Relatedly, as discussed earlier in the section, this thesis raises timely issues about the role of non-European migration,³² specifically Asian migrants, in shaping urbanisms in peripheral spaces situated in disempowered cities in the Global South. Moreover, by focusing on the Southeast Asian population in Argentina, I look at the way the Lao refugee resettlement

32 I use the term migration generously throughout the dissertation to refer to global population movements that include forcibly displaced people, like refugees. A capacious term, migration speaks to the phenomenon of mass human movement and is broad enough to make visible migrant and refugee capacities to push the limits of national foundational ideas about citizenship, rights, and difference. Since citizenship is a historically contested category that continues to be based on a principle of sedentarism as the precondition for recognizing human autonomy and the allocation of rights, migrant contributions to cities are often not accounted for beyond the multicultural sheen said migrants provide to cities. That is, when migrants are accounted for, it is often as a means to reinscribe legitimacy to 19th century conceptions of citizenship and to the State apparatus as the only legitimate guarantor and source of said rights.

program initially articulated race and labor in a manner that positioned Lao refugees as foreign and external to the nation through a racial project that represented them as “maladapted” due to their demand that the conditions that Argentine officials had promised in Thai refugee camps be kept. The emergence of a Lao racial project representing Lao refugees as maladapted was tied to their abandonment of resettlement sites and was deployed in the media and state institutions initially to justify de-facto Lao exclusion. Lao refugees were positioned as external and foreign in relation to Argentine national identity. Interestingly, with the neoliberal multicultural shift that began in the 1980s, the externalization of Lao and Lao Argentines has since been modified. Lao refugee history is now included in Argentina by reinscribing the Lao refugee experience as just another group of migrants in Argentina, thus flattening and erasing the contentious history that shaped their arrival and eventual settlement. Notwithstanding, Lao refugees and their descendants have maintained their own sense of history and crafted a communal narrative that asserts their presence as simultaneously irrefutable *and* involuntary, with some of my interlocutors claiming both Lao and criollo identity, maintaining their right to difference *and* their right to the city.

Accounting for the seeds—the title for this introduction—recalls the images evoked by Chanmali’s familial anecdote as I find an inherent optimism in it. An optimism displaying a yearning for what tomorrow may bring and which embodies a vitalist pragmatic—the notion that desire, not rational choice, is one of the main engines of human action. Even if optimism is not closely associated (nor a desired feature) of academic intellectual production, I open the introduction with Chanmali’s familial memory because it underscores an optimism of the will that, although not always

expressed in words, I often encountered in Posadas. Aware that people consciously choose to highlight elements of their memory over others depending on who is listening and taking note, and that memories only reveal partial truths, I begin with Chanmali's mothers' seeds and discuss their metaphorical fruits in the chapters that follow.

Methodology

I began research for this doctoral dissertation in 2014 and ended in 2018. I visited archives in Buenos Aires at the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno in the summer of 2014 and got a hold of dozens of dictatorship-era newspaper articles that documented the arrival of Lao refugees in Argentina. These primary sources led me to identify the city of Posadas as a place of interest due to various accounts of conflict with refugees coming from Misiones. This was the first clue which led me to discover the significance of Posadas in Lao resettlement. After digitizing primary sources from 1979-1982, I wondered about the whereabouts of refugees—what had happened to them since? Where were they now? Most people I asked had no idea that Lao refugees ever resided in Argentina in the first place, and the few who remembered, did not know where I could find more information. Or if they were still in Argentina.

The archive came to life in 2015 and provided many answers to my questions. I returned to Argentina during summer 2015 and met with a few Lao interlocutors in Posadas thanks to an encounter I had in NYC in the spring of that same year with a second-generation Lao-Argentine woman who grew up in Misiones. She provided me her father's contact, who still lives in Posadas. I then returned to Posadas in January 2018 and the bulk of personal histories and Posadas-specific primary sources were collected

during this five month research stay (January-May 2018) funded by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective.

My methodology is interdisciplinary and borrows from the conceptual contributions of Critical Refugee Studies, Asian American Studies, and Urban Studies because these areas allow for the kind of contingent, historically and politically situated, conjunctural, and multi-scalar analysis that I am interested in extending and contributing to. Critical Refugee Studies' conceptual tools underline the importance of thinking about the refugee as an analytic, rather than an object of intervention, to make the forces that produce the category of refugee visible as a way to counter trends that reduce displacement to individualized trauma narratives. The refugee as an analytic refutes the presumed naturalness and inevitability that often accompanies analyses and representations of refugees and displaced peoples. Hemispheric Asian American Studies insightfully draws attention to the entwined histories of Asia and Latin America, which date back to the centuries old Manila-Acapulco galleon trade that connected Spain, Mexico, and the Philippines (1565-1815) as well as the early records of Chinese immigrant presence in Peru since 1613. These varied and divergent historical trajectories point to the limitation of thinking about modern Asia and Latin America as separate cultural entities. This challenge is perhaps best illustrated in Columbus's *lapsus calami* upon arriving to the Caribbean in 1492 on his search for a new route to India, to this day the term "indio" is still a misnomer referring to native peoples of North and South America. The insights of Hemispheric Asian American Studies frame my focus of Southeast Asian life in Argentina by situating the presences of Southeast Asians in this *longue durée* and help me give nuance to the specific conjunctures that give Southeast

Asian refugee history its specificity, particularity, and difference. I borrow the concept of the urban/urbanity from the field of Urban Studies to think about the spatial characteristics and social processes particular to the city of Posadas and the way these characteristics relate to Lao refugee experiences in the city. Together, these conceptual tools instruct my inquiry into the relationship between the contemporary Latin American nation-state and immigrant populations, Argentina's Asian immigrants in the neoliberal era, and the relationship between migrants and urbanity in the Global South.

I also borrow research methods from the fields of history, anthropology, and sociology: archival research, oral history, participant observation, qualitative interviews, and snowball sampling. I chose these methods because together they make visible a Lao Argentine trajectory that challenges national histories and official statist accounts. By relying on archival research, oral history, participant observation, and qualitative interviews, I situate official accounts alongside refugee narratives to highlight fissures and refugee perspectives that resist presenting Argentina's Southeast Asian resettlement program as seamless, coherent, and functional to Argentine nation building. My interest in seeing from below calls for embedding refugee perspectives in the narration of their own history and elevating them as valuable sources of knowledge.

The primary sources cited were gathered from three important Argentine newspapers published during the military junta between 1979 and 1982: *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *La Prensa*. *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *La Prensa* provided national coverage of the Lao resettlement program from its inception. They also disseminated important information to the public on behalf of Argentina's Ministry of the Interior. I also use primary sources from Posadas's largest and oldest newspaper, *El Territorio*, where I

found Misiones-specific coverage about Lao refugees that extends onto today. Broadly, these media sources utilized a sympathetic discourse towards the military dictatorship at the start of resettlement and demonstrated an ideological allegiance to the junta, portraying resettlement as a humanitarian gesture and refugee unrest as unruly and maladapted. Post-dictatorship accounts of Lao refugees are more nuanced and range from critical assessments of the junta's motives for resettlement to flattening multicultural celebrations of Lao difference in Posadas that omits Lao refugees' status as workers and incorporates them in a seamless narrative of Argentine immigration history. Other official sources used in this dissertation include reports from the Ministry of the Interior.

Overall, my research presents a counter-narrative of the resettlement program by detailing a history from below, relying on oral histories as sources of knowledge alongside conventional sources. Elevating marginalized people's accounts of events matters because, in the case of refugees, they have primarily been allowed entry into the public sphere only when they present themselves as traumatized. Public discourse that does not center trauma, and focuses on the conditions that create despair and marginalization, is seen as inauthentic. This dissertation distances itself from psychologizing accounts of refugee experiences and looks to the narratives generated by Lao refugees to provide a deeper understanding of resettlement in Latin America.

The sources detailing the Southeast Asian refugee program from *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *La Prensa* were compiled from the *Archivo México-Argentina* housed in the Biblioteca Nacional Mario Moreno in Buenos Aires. The archive was created by Argentine members of the Montoneros exiled in Mexico during the dictatorship from 1976-1983. The *Movimiento Peronista Montonero* (Peronist Montonero Movement) was

a leftist urban guerilla group active in the 1960s forced to flee under the growing threat of torture and disappearance.³³ The *Archivo México-Argentina* was opened to the public in 2014 after mysteriously traveling through various cities in central Mexico, eventually landing in Buenos Aires. I do not know who arranged the motley collection of archival documents contained in the *Archivo México-Argentina* containing various clippings related to labor union politics, human rights abuses, and Catholic church controversies. The archivists at the National Library told me that they assume the collection was a collective endeavor that passed through the hands of many.

I include these details because I read the Montoneros' archive as a counter-narrative of the junta's resettlement program. The Montoneros carefully gathered articles from mainstream, pro-junta newspapers that celebrated the humanitarian face of the dictatorship and documented a spectacle of humanitarianism that made apparent this inescapable irony: a group of Argentine political exiles victims of state violence and repression tracked the unfolding story of Southeast Asian resettlement from their own experiences of displacement. Witnessing from afar how soon the junta's welcome of Lao refugees turned to condemnation, the Montoneros' efforts kept alive memory of the program for fear that the Argentine state would later rewrite, if not flat-out erase and omit, Lao refugee history. For this reason, the Montonero archive represents an important gesture of solidarity. Alas, the last forty years proved the unknown archivists' suspicions right as widespread knowledge of the Southeast Refugee Resettlement Program is limited. The historical method and interpretation in the dissertation is informed by insights gleaned from thinking about this collection of documents as a transnational leftist

33 Maria Jose Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969-1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

archive shaped by multi-layered experiences of militarism and displacement that also impacted the lives of Lao refugees during their early years in Argentina. The Montoneros' archive invites a relational analysis of the ways internal and external others have been constructed in Argentina and is an ad-hoc alternative archive of Lao resettlement.

With this in mind, refugee oral histories consolidate this counter archive of Lao Argentine history. My research produces an alternate archive of Lao life in Posadas by gathering perspectives from Lao refugees, second-generation Lao, and their mixed-race spouses. I spoke with many Lao refugees off the record but only twenty interlocutors agreed to be interviewed and formally recorded. Our recordings range from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. Some people were interviewed multiple times. I interviewed twelve men and eight women. They are primarily from the provinces of Misiones (15), while some are from Buenos Aires (3), Santa Fe (1), and Neuquen (1). Sixteen out of the twenty people are first-generation and arrived with refugee status (some were small children at the time), and two people belong to the second-generation and are children born to refugees in Argentina. The only non-Lao interview is of the Guarani-Argentine spouse of a first-generation Lao refugee who arrived as a child to Misiones. One of the two second-generation Lao interviewed is the mixed-raced daughter of a Lao refugee and an Argentine woman who then married a first-generation Lao refugee man who originally arrived in 1979. I had many informal conversations with multiple people in Posadas familiar with Lao history in the region, primarily first-generation Lao refugees, some second-generation Lao, and Argentine neighbors and friends with whom Lao refugees had close ties. As I have referenced throughout this introduction, Lao oral history situates

Lao refugees as agents who produce knowledge about their conditions and decenters the role of the state and institutions like the UNHCR as the only legitimate repositories of Lao history in Argentina. Additionally, in discussing migration and displacement in relation to urbanity in the Global South, oral histories are texts which tell different stories about the urban condition. Instead of relying on accounts that prioritize administrative, business, and/or governmental record definitions of the urban, oral histories produce alternative meanings that provide a different understanding of urbanity.³⁴ The refugee oral histories here explore the racialized contours of refugee settlements in Posadas and point to the conditions that made self-organization possible in places like Wanda, El Brete, Colonia Laosiana, San Isidro, and Yohasá.

This work does not evade Lao refugees' identity as workers and aims to show how labor intersects with the category of refugee to produce inequality exacerbated by neoliberal conditions. Themes like work and social reproduction came up often in my conversations, guiding my decision to write about a *refugee-worker* identity. Concerns with making a living and finding work were central in our conversations and influenced people's decisions to move around the country.

I formally interviewed only a few second-generation Lao because many were not interested in speaking to me about their experiences on the record. In one case, I interviewed an elderly woman with the help of her daughter's translation, and when I asked the daughter for a separate interview she refused. In another instance, another woman told me she would not talk to me due to a previous negative experience with a journalist. She said the reporter misrepresented her and her husband's words, and

34 Nancy Kwak, "Understanding 'urban' from the disciplinary viewpoint of history," in *Defining the Urban*, eds., Deljana Iossifova, Christopher N.H. Doll and Alexandros Gasparatos (London: Routledge, 2017) 59.

divulged sensitive information about the community in Posadas that she explicitly told the reporter not to reveal. As anyone who has ever done ethnographic work knows, establishing trust with one's interlocutors is paramount and the "field" is not a neutral space. My interlocutors were predominantly men and this is partly a reflection of a broader patriarchal gendered division of labor in the community and Lao refugee men's command of Spanish. In the last decades, Lao refugee men often had the role of community representatives. Men were also tasked with speaking to the media, were elected as community spokespersons, and often made press statements. Lao refugee women spoke to me informally but did not want to be interviewed or recorded. Generally, a language barrier existed with first-generation Lao refugee women and I could not communicate with female elders without the help of a translator which limited my ability to establish rapport with them.

As a last note, I want to address a possible quantitative curiosity—why is looking at such small group of people important? Lao refugees and their descendants are in the thousands and continue to be omitted from recent accounts of Argentine history. If their history is known, it is slowly absorbed into a multicultural migration narrative in Argentina. This narrative glosses over the travails Lao refugees encountered once they arrived, and homogenizes and positions all Asian migrants as external and interchangeable with each other. This reinstates the Argentine fiction that European immigration is the defining feature of the modern nation-state in spite of the changing demographic reality of 21st century Argentina. As I argue, in addition to city-making, Lao refugees perform types of labor that are important for the functioning of racialized economic sectors that straddle formality and informality, they are key sites for

understanding the dynamics of border cities like Posadas. Lao refugees are active in the textile industry through small-scale clothes smuggling which links formal enterprises with informal labor, and they contribute to small-scale agricultural production which has also led to the popularization of ginger in and beyond Misiones, for example. Lao refugees also participate in small-scale agricultural trading and vending by way of inter-Asian immigrant networks that exist within Misiones and sometimes extend to other provinces. These inter-Asian immigrant networks animate the economic life of Asian Argentina in ways that exceed the scope of my dissertation. That is a project waiting to be undertaken. In Posadas, the border allows many Lao refugee families to be self-employed by opening *almacenes*, or small shops, in front of their homes as they supply their shop shelves with smuggled goods from Paraguay. These house-run convenience stores sell miscellaneous goods like chips, soda, and flip flops to their neighbors at low prices. In a city where dictatorship-era urbanization plans led to unequal and rapid housing development, these small shops provide access to affordable consumer goods otherwise inaccessible to working poor populations living in peripheral parts of the city. To gauge the impact of Lao refugee city-making in Posadas requires us to reconsider the assumption that small statistical numbers translates to social insignificance.

Chapter Breakdown

The dissertation has three main chapters and is organized chronologically. Chapter one analyzes Lao racial formation in the context of the Argentine junta's racial project during the dictatorship in order to identify the ideological underpinnings informing early representations of Lao refugees. I identify the nation-building myths

undergirding Argentine national and regional identity and discuss their implications for Asian immigrant and refugee populations. Lao racialization occurs in the context of revamped Argentine settler colonial ideologies refracted through a neoliberal lens during the dictatorship and after the country's democratic transition in 1983. Argentine racial scripts sanctioned the state's marginalization of Lao refugee families and served to naturalize their precarious life conditions. Theoretically, this chapter is situated within hemispheric approaches to the study of Latin Asian America and is anchored in Iyko Day's concept of *racial bifurcation* and in Kandice Chuch's concept of *dichotomy*. Bifurcation and dichotomy emerge from literature about Asian racialization in Asian North America and I show that these concepts relate to Asian Argentine modes of racialization if we follow the connective thread of dispossessive neoliberal capitalism.

Chapter two highlights the intersections between race and class in the case of the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program through an analysis of militarized humanitarianism. I situate the program in the geopolitical context of the Cold War which informed Argentina's decision to engage resettlement efforts. I also challenge the idea that the host/refugee dichotomy offers the best entryway to thinking about social antagonisms in the context of resettlement. In other words, using archival material I show that the junta's resettlement program was an unofficial immigrant labor recruitment effort of Southeast Asian refugee labor aimed at supplying small agricultural enterprises located in underpopulated provinces throughout Argentina with refugee workers. I underscore the importance of the category of refugee-worker for analyzing the initial years of Lao resettlement (1979-1982) and discuss Lao refugees' labor actions and work-site abandonment soon after their arrival in Argentina. These events cemented the racialized

image of Lao refugee-workers as *maladapted* and speaks to the crass contradictions of Decree 2073, which established the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program, and the ideological underpinnings of humanitarianism.

Chapter three traces the multiple roads that turned Misiones into a national paragon of refugee resettlement. I address contradictory accounts about settlement in the province. Using oral histories, I identify key refugee figures who secured land and resources for some Lao refugee families, and the effects their advocacy had on the broader Lao community of Posadas. Chapter three also details the significance of the former riverbank neighborhood of El Brete (1980-1998) for understanding Lao city-making practices and the establishment of the Colonia Laosiana (1982-1984). I also discuss the role that the Yacyretá Binational Entity's (EBY in the Spanish acronym) played in influencing semi-permanent settlement by consolidating the newer Lao barrios of Yohasá (1998-1999) and San Isidro (2007) after the EBY dam flooded El Brete. El Brete and Colonia Laosiana fostered the necessary relationships and frictions leading to long-term settlement in Posadas. This chapter elaborates the significance of peripheral urban spaces and shines light on the way that Posadas's border condition has shaped the lives of refugees. Lastly, this chapter looks at the important shifts in refugee management after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Interior Ministry were no longer key players in refugee resettlement and shows the demise of their influence which made room for the emergence of actors such as the EBY.

In their totality these three chapters paint a picture of Lao life in Argentina that accounts for the multiple forces and actors responsible for the consolidation of Posadas as

the city Lao refugees call home and initiates a dialogue about Asian Latin America that centers racialized immigrant labor in contemporary Argentina.

Chapter 1 Writing Latin Asian America

Overture

Esperemos que sigamos las tradiciones de nuestros padres, digamos, lo que nos dejan. Después en otro tiempo, no sé, vamos a ver, nuestros hijos, nuestros nietos, vamos a ver. Esperemos que no se olviden nunca de la cultura que nos dejan nuestros padres, todo eso, que no se pierda.

Let's hope we continue our parents' traditions, what they leave us. In the future, I don't know, we'll see. Our children, grandchildren, we'll see. Let's hope they don't ever forget the culture that our parents have given us, all of that, let's hope it's not lost.

—Phetdum O., 46 years old.

I interviewed Phetdum (46) in Keowyn's (60) patio days after Boun Phatamphi. Phetdum traveled to Posadas from Santa Fe province with his elderly father to attend the fest in February 2018. Keowyn and I had met briefly in 2015 and I learned he had been an instrumental Lao community representative during housing negotiations with the Yacyretá Binational Entity (EBY in the Spanish acronym). In the late 1990s nearly a hundred Lao families living in El Brete dealt with the inevitable threat of displacement due to the EBY's plans to turn their neighborhood into the Yacyretá Dam's reservoir. This relocation process left the refugee families with nowhere to go and a battle over housing ensued soon after. Keowyn is well-respected in the community for his leadership role in the housing negotiations with the EBY and for belonging to the original 16 refugee families resettled in Misiones in 1980.

When I arrived to Keowyn's home in Barrio Yohasá that afternoon he clarified that though Phetdum was not a blood relative he was family. He later explained that the experience of resettlement in Argentina led Lao refugees to develop a tight sense of kinship due to the travails they collectively endured. I then interviewed Phetdum who arrived to Buenos Aires when he was only 7 years old. He lives in Santa Fe province with his extended family and Phetdum and his parents visit Posadas as frequently as work permits. He proudly shared that he was among the paisanos who helped build the Colonia Laosiana's Buddhist temple in 1998. Phetdum plans to move to Posadas when he's older because he likes the city's relaxed atmosphere and he knows many people there. He told me it was important for the second and third generations to maintain their parents' traditions because the first generation experienced much hardship in Argentina. Phetdum's desire for memory and continuity through cultural practice reminded me of historian Evelyn Hu-DeHart's designation of the study of Asia and Latin America as a project of historical recovery.³⁵ Phetdum expresses a similar sentiment when he says that Lao refugees have a history in Argentina that deserves to be known and remembered. This chapter takes Phetdum's affirmation to task and offers an overture of recent Asian Argentine history by analyzing Lao refugee racial formation during and after the military dictatorship period while setting it against the backdrop of broader national ideologies.

Whereas the Argentine dictatorship period has been aptly identified as neo-fascist, counterinsurgent, and neoliberal, I argue that it also needs to be recognized as a racial project. This chapter analyzes Lao racial formation in the context of the Argentine dictatorship's explicit revindication of the Argentine nation as European, ultra-

35 Andrea Bachner and Pedro Erber, "Remapping the Transpacific: Critical Approaches between Asia and Latin America," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 3, 2 (2017): viii.

conservative, Catholic, and committed to the free-market. The dictatorship's revival of 19th century Argentine nation-building myths that imagined the nation as an extension of Europe, and hence white, contrasts with the shifts that Argentine national identity underwent in the late 20th century. Additionally, Lao refugee resettlement and Lao racialization has not been studied in relation to the dictatorship's deepening ties with Asia. Resettlement functioned as a strategy to court additional sources of labor during the junta's modernizing project where a novel, if contradictory, racial project emerged. The Argentine dictatorship set the foundation for future demographic shifts starting with a series of diplomatic visits and agreements with East Asia that eventually led to an increase in East Asian capital investment along with new waves of Asian immigrant labor. This move departed significantly from Argentina's historical reliance on European immigrant labor in the late 19th and early 20th century as a means to "modernize" the nation. While in power, the military dictatorship encouraged Asian investment and immigration from China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Forty years later, China has emerged as an established trade partner in Argentina and throughout the region. This chapter captures one of this dissertation's major contributions: situating the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program in the junta's efforts to increase Argentina's ties with Asia to chart the country's growing tendency towards reliance on Asian immigrant labor in the late 20th century.

In their introduction to the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*' special edition on race and Latin America, Tanya Golash-Boza and Eduardo Bonilla Silva remind us that "[R]ace and national ideologies in the Americas are inextricable," and Argentina is no

exception.³⁶ Historically, Argentine conceptions of whiteness were racially informed though not enforced through the legal architecture of explicit racist exclusion found in settler-colonial U.S. society, for example. The sheer ethnic heterogeneity accompanying 19th century immigration flows to the Southern Cone precluded such approach. At the time, the Buenos Aires-based elite faced the conundrum of coalescing a motley crowd of recently arrived Southern, Eastern, and non-European immigrant populations into a unified whole. In accordance with 19th century racial metrics and classifications, *porteño*³⁷ elites placed Anglo-Saxons and northern Europeans in the highest racial ranks and saved the lowest rungs for the remaining, though larger, heterogeneous group of immigrants.

As I discuss in this chapter, hegemonic conceptions of Argentine national identity are the outcome of an elite-led, *porteño* homogenizing whitening project concerned with upholding “boat mythology”; namely, that Argentines descended from the boats that transported European immigrants to the Rio de la Plata’s shores. Captured in the Spanish phrase “*los argentinos descienden de los barcos*,” the myth of the Argentine as a white European descendant is inextricable to national conceptions of urbanity. The national imaginary perceives provincial Argentina as devoid of civilization, and, historically, modernity has been circumscribed to the port city of Buenos Aires. 19th century settlement policies ensured that immigrants remained in the capital which cemented the connection between whiteness and the metropole. For this reason, race in Argentina carries an important geographical, territorial, and spatial connotation. In 1945, writer Florencio Escardo described the capital of Buenos Aires as “the white city of a mestizo

36 Tanya Golash-Boza and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking race, racism, identity and ideology in Latin America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, 10 (2013): 1485.

37 Sobriquet for people from the port city of Buenos Aires.

America,” and, “the headquarters of the colonizers, not the colonized.”³⁸ Compared to the homogenized, whitened, metropolitan, and predominantly European character ascribed to Argentine national identity,³⁹ Afro, Asian, criollo and indigenous identities in Argentina do not hold the same weight in immigration scholarship. The junta harnessed this powerful imaginary rhetorically and politically by repositioning itself as a steward of white, Catholic Argentina, a conception with roots in 19th century racist ethnic identity movements.

This chapter’s focus on Lao racialization sheds light on Argentine and Latin American Asian immigration experiences and questions the “completeness” of the racial triad model frequently used in Latin American Studies to anchor Latin American national trajectories in the colonial encounters between African, European, and indigenous populations. Though useful and insightful, the racial triad model does not account for the presence of Asian immigrants and the ways Asian populations have also shaped conceptions of modern Latin American national identity during the colonial and modern nation-building periods. For example, 19th and 20th century nation-building projects throughout Latin America have in common the shared belief that the ‘yellow race’ would ‘degenerate’ the nascent Latin American nation. Such ideas circulated in influential nation-building intellectual works in Argentina, Mexico, and Peru.⁴⁰

38 Quoted in Alejandro Grimson, “Raza y clase en los orígenes del peronismo: Argentina, 1945,” *Desacatos* 55, (septiembre-diciembre 2017): 117.

39 The hegemonic European character in Argentina is understood in the key of Italian and Spanish culture, although other groups of European immigrants settled in the country.

40 Jason Oliver Chang, “Racial Alterity in the Mestizo Nation,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 14, 3 (2011): 331-359.

“One of the three whitest nations in the world”

As recently as 1978 the dictatorship-era Minister of the Interior General Albano Harguindeguy encouraged new waves of European migrants “to continue to be one of the three whitest nations in the world.”⁴¹ The dictatorship’s renewed brand of authoritarian and rearward Eurocentrism responded to important 20th century Argentine political processes which had fractured 19th century nation building discourses that linked European immigration to civilization, the metropole, and national modernization projects. During the Cold War, Argentina’s leftist social movements participated in global anti-imperialist political projects and joined calls for the decolonization and national liberation of the Third World. The Latin American leftist tradition, greatly influenced by the Cuban Revolution (1959) and other Third World liberation struggles including the Vietnamese people’s anticolonial struggle, critiqued Eurocentric conceptions of nationhood, specially the racist underpinnings of Latin American definitions of national identity. New Left Argentine movements were not alone in questioning 19th century foundational origin stories. Decades prior to the global sixties in Argentina, President Juan Domingo Peron’s (1945-1955) tenure also modified civilizational Europeanist ideologies by introducing a class-based, populist, and autochthonous national identity best captured in Peronism’s vindications of *el pueblo* (the people), criollismo, and the figure of the *descamisado* (the shirtless). Criollo, a term used throughout Argentina and Uruguay, carries contested cultural, racial, and spatial connotations. It describes people born in the Americas and includes those with and *without* European ancestry. The Argentine criollo ethos is defined by ruggedness, austere simplicity, and an appreciation

41 Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (New York Oxford University Press, 2014), 135.

of nature—characteristics also associated with gaucho culture and provincial rurality. The term *criollo* emerged in the colonial period throughout the continent and was used to differentiate Spaniards born in the Americas from those born in Europe. Its contemporary usage in Argentina, however, has shifted and blurred. Because *mestizaje* ideologies have not been institutionalized in Argentina like in other Latin American countries, over time Argentines came to define *criollo* as the amalgamation of African, indigenous, and poor Spanish-settler cultures associated with provincial Argentina in opposition to a whitened, metropolitan identity. Peronism popularized the term *criollo* and equated it to Argentineness, resignifying national identity in ways that still resonate to this day. Currently, cultural practices in large cities are considered *criollas* if they embrace Argentine autochthonous syncretism versus overtly Eurocentric practices. In my interviews, Lao refugees and their children often referred to themselves as *criollos*, reflecting the term's polyvalent meaning, flexible usage, and adoption by broad sectors of the population.

In addition to reclaiming the term *criollo*, Peronist political discourse also introduced the figure of the *descamisado* (the shirtless). The *descamisado* is a significant symbol in the Argentine racial imaginary because it signaled, for the first time in modern Argentine history, the inclusion of the racialized, rural/provincial majorities in definitions of Argentineness. The *descamisado* refracted Argentineness through the language of class yet strategically evaded race and the racial connotations of provincial territories, spaces, and places. Peronism's failure to explicitly engage the racial underpinnings of Argentine national identity is key because, as Tanja Bastia and Matthias vom Hau observe, "The Peronist period represented a substantial revision but not a complete transformation of the

construction of Argentina as a white nation of European descendants.”⁴² Limitations notwithstanding, Peronism successfully connected racial difference to class struggle. Argentine elites and the Argentine right continue to use the pejorative term *cabecita negra* (black head) to refer to the political subject produced by Peronism—a subject with non-European roots and the dark features of those living in the provinces. The dictatorship’s reaction and virulent defense of a white, Argentine identity must be contextualized as a direct affront to the enduring legacy of Peronism in the country and the perceived threat posed by the political influence of *cabecitas negras*, its internal othered population.

The junta’s revindication of Eurocentric settler history responded to the challenges introduced decades prior by both Peronism and the Latin American Left. Both of these political currents fractured the foundational understandings of the national self by seeking alternatives to 19th century boat mythologies. Together these processes frame the tensions shaping contemporary debates about Argentine identity and provide it its national specificity. In situating Lao racial formation within the dictatorship’s revindication of a Eurocentric racial project, I emphasize disputes, fractures, and changes in Argentine national identity narratives in relation to race, migration, and nation. I write about Lao racialization in the context of 20th century regional Argentine racial formations that imbue Lao racialization with a particularity not generalizable to other Asian immigrants living in Argentina. I do this to discern the ways that Lao racialization converges with but also *diverges from* other Asian ethnic groups. Scholarly work about Asians in Argentina mainly focuses on Buenos Aires-based immigrant populations, such

42 Tanja Bastia and Matthias von Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, 3 (2014): 483.

as Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese immigrants. Buenos Aires-focused work reflects different processes compared to the dynamics of differential inclusion present in Argentina's provinces. Twentieth century nation-building in Argentina did not ascribe a white character to the provinces in the same manner as it did to Buenos Aires and this is an important difference informing the Lao refugee city-making in the provinces. In many ways this difference has allowed the Lao to form and shape neighborhoods according to their needs in ways that have not threatened their Argentine neighbors. Nevertheless, in examining the ideological underpinnings of Lao refugee representation in regional and national media outlets, I detail commonly recurring tropes in their racialization, like their characterization as "maladapted" and their association with criminality and economic informality in the years that followed resettlement.

This chapter's overture to Asian Argentina amplifies Hemispheric Asian American approaches to the study of Latin America and also dialogues with burgeoning scholarship about Asian North America in Ethnic Studies to show why a hemispheric approach is best suited to contextualize historical and contemporary Asian immigrations in the Americas while at the same time remaining sensitive to national specificity.

As briefly discussed in the introduction, the Argentine dictatorship-period increased economic ties with Asia which led to demographic changes in Buenos Aires and other cities. Argentina's increased relationship with Asia, and China in particular, has only deepened after its transition to democracy in 1983. Demonstrating that nation-building interests and capital do not align neatly, these ties manifest a contradiction between the Argentine state's capital-driven pursuits and its whitening nation-building project. Nevertheless, reducing Asian-Argentine ties to their economic foundations is

perhaps the main reason why Asian and Argentine intersections continue to be seen solely as matters of geopolitics rather than intersections with important cultural and social dimensions. Economic arrangements informed by geopolitics often involve the movement of people and in this case include refugee resettlement. In the case of 20th century Argentina I identify two distinct logics to Asian Argentine immigrations, one that is labor maximizing and another that is capital maximizing. The case of Lao refugee recruitment is exemplary of the state's labor maximizing policies in provincial areas, whereas capital maximizing policies have mainly routed the immigration of East Asians to urban centers in Argentina.

In this chapter I focus on the Argentine state's labor maximizing logic and briefly discuss capital maximizing logics to identify changes in Argentine ideas about immigration, race, and nation in the late 20th century. I argue that Latin Asian Americans expose the limits of nation-building projects in Latin America, and this chapter invites us to rethink common tropes about the region as well as widely-held beliefs about Argentine national history. The presence of Lao refugees and other Asian Argentines is characterized by their excess in the *crisol* the razas narrative; an excess with racial, politico-economic, and social dimensions that requires further exploration.

Writing Latin Asian America

To write Latin Asian America is to engage a hemispheric perspective and to view Asian immigration in the Americas as a *longue durée*. Writing Latin Asian America this way overcomes the notion that Asia and Latin America are distinct cultural categories, or

detached geographic spaces. The interdisciplinary field of Hemispheric Asian American Studies (HAAS) has introduced a series of generative insights informed by US-based Asian American Studies (AAS) and Latin American Studies (LAS) by linking the diverse trajectories of Asian immigration throughout the Americas. A hemispheric perspective is a necessary first step in recovering Latin Asian American legacies.

The concept of relationality is a focus of HAAS approaches to migration routes between Asian North America and Latin Asian America. Historically, racist quota systems in immigration policies in the North have shaped population flows to the South. For instance, the US-based Japanese Gentleman's Agreement (1907) that barred the immigration of working class and working poor Japanese men to the US along with the Johnson-Reed Act's (1924) anti-Asian quotas rerouted Asian immigrant populations to Latin America.⁴³ Relatedly, the Johnson-Reed Act's racially exclusionary quotas were a continuation of earlier anti-Asian bills in North America, like the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which also impacted Asian immigration flows throughout the continent by creating new destinations in Latin America that led to the establishment of enclaves. Brazil's consolidation as an important Japanese immigrant destination in the early 20th century was influenced by the Johnson-Reed Act, for example. One of the most important Nikkei communities in the Americas flourished in Brazil, rivaling the size of the Nikkei postwar community in the US.⁴⁴ Nikkei immigrants and their descendants changed Brazil's cultural character and history, specially in the state of São Paulo where Japanese immigrants largely settled.

43 Andrea Bachner, Christopher Bush, Christopher L. Hill, Ana Carolina Hosne, Rosario Hubert, Seth Jacobowitz, André Keiji Kunigami, Andrew Leong, and Zelideth María Rivas, "Approaches between Asia and Latin America: A Critical Renga," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 3, 2 (2017): 61.

44 Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, 1 (2008): 13.

Orientalism and anti-Asian sentiment, however, also informed policies and perceptions throughout the North and South. Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López point out that Chinese immigrants' migration patterns are illustrative of broader hemispheric Asian immigration trends given the longevity of Chinese immigration to the Americas. Chinese presence in South America, for example, dates back to the 17th century. The recruitment of Asian immigrant labor is exemplified by the 19th century *trata amarilla*, or coolie-trade, whereby indentured Chinese migrant labor was recruited for agricultural production along with newer mid-20th century flows of urban and commercially-bound labor migration that continue to this day.⁴⁵ Far from universalizing the Chinese experience to other nationalities and ethnic groups, Chinese waves of immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries matter because these migration experiences left imprints in Orientalist Latin American thought. They informed the future immigration policies of Latin American governments as well as the racialization of other Asian ethnic groups and nationalities. Both the Japanese and Chinese cases underscore the importance of relational hemispheric analyses and why, though illustrative of different racialization processes, Asian North America and Latin Asian America share important historical links.⁴⁶

Furthermore, hemispheric relational analyses show that the immigration of Asians to the Americas is not a predominantly US-based phenomenon, as may be deduced from

45 Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, 1 (2008):13-15.

46 Shelley Streeby raises objections to the use of hemisphere as an alternative framework to empire by positing that the hemispheric turn has the risk of placing itself outside of empire, implying there are no clear centers. Streeby makes valuable and important arguments, but I still consider the hemispheric approach to Latin Asian America necessary. If attuned to inequalities and power imbalances, a hemispheric approach is capacious enough to address continent-wide asymmetries and agency without falling into the dichotomous trap that characterizes empire as an all-powerful, unidirectional force in the Global South. See Shelley Streeby, "Empire," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, eds. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 95.

nation-based AAS approaches.⁴⁷ Commenting on the US's epistemological dominance in migration scholarship in the hemisphere, Debbie Lee-DiStefano writes in the introduction to the seminal book *Imagining Asia in the Americas* that the category "Asian American" is a referent that "seems to refer historically to the US context, whereas in reality, Asian immigrants settled throughout the entire hemisphere, primarily in the Caribbean and South America, long before there was a significant Asian presence in the United States."⁴⁸ HAAS scholars like Mark Overmyer-Velazquez and Rudy Guevarra warn that an overly US-centric focus has the potential to reproduce American exceptionalist narratives about race and immigration that position the US as superior for its perceived "multicultural" uniqueness.⁴⁹ The fact is that the imbrication of immigration and race is not a US-specific phenomenon in the Americas, nor a condition that sets Empire apart from the rest of the world. Although this is self-evident to scholars writing in and from the South, writing about Latin Asian America in English, from the North, requires a reckoning with the dichotomy that positions the South as situated and local and the North as global and universal.

Uruguayan Cold War historian Aldo Marchesi criticizes this tendency as it appears in the field of Global History. For example, Marchesi argues that the situated/local vs. global/universal binary fails to grasp that the Global South also has internal logics. The Global South acts according to interests which cannot be reduced to its unequal relations with the Global North. In his writing about the Latin American Cold

47 Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian immigrants are the three the most important diasporas in Latin America.

48 Maria Zelideth Rivas and Debbie Lee-DiStefano, eds., *Imagining Asia in the Americas* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 2.

49 Mark Overmyer-Velazquez, "Centering and De-Centering the Latin(o) American Migrant: Transnational and Comparative Race Formation in the Americas," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, 2 (2017); Rudy P. Guevarra Jr., "Introduction to the Special Issue," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 14, 2 (2011).

War, and Southern Cone dictatorships in particular, Marchesi emphasizes the South's internal logic and agency when it came to negotiating US empire demands. The conglomerate of Southern Cone dictatorships in the 1970s (Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay) looked to fulfill its national interests when negotiating diplomatic and economic relationships with the US. Unquestionably a powerful actor, US empire's role in the Latin American Cold War was not all encompassing, monolithic, nor coherent. Scholarship that presents US empire as a totality omits the agency of local actors, institutions, and states. It reveals more about the epistemic vices of empire than about the national and regional dynamics, internal power struggles, and self-interests that influence decision-making processes outside the US and Europe, which sometimes include making pacts with the North.⁵⁰ Marchesi's insights serve as a cautionary tale in my writing about Latin American and, instead of simply considering Argentine trajectories as localized, national experiences that do not provide insights about our modern condition, I think about how "localized," national Asian immigration experiences in Argentina are also reflective of global processes. In the case of Lao resettlement, I relate Lao racialization to broader trends in Argentine nation-building during the dictatorship and show the global elements present in Lao Argentine history which cannot be reduced to imperial impositions.

After all, the Argentine dictatorship only agreed to resettle Lao refugees after obtaining a loan from the US-based Export-Import Bank. The loan was intended for purchasing missing turbines for the Yacyretá Dam in Misiones province. As President Jimmy Carter's administration grew critical of the junta's domestic policies and

50 Aldo Marchesi, "Escribiendo la Guerra Fría Latinoamericana: Entre el Sur "Local" y el Norte "Global," *Estudios Históricos* 30, 60 (2017).

economic relations with the Soviet Union, Export-Import Bank officials warned Argentina that it needed to improve its human rights track-record before they could approve the junta's loan requests. Argentina's bid for Lao resettlement at the UN heeded the bank's caveat. Ultimately, the Argentine junta's political and economic maneuvers at the time of resettlement responded to international constraints and to a set of interests that had everything to do with its neoliberal vision of urbanization which saw neoliberal policies as the route to modernization. The dictatorship's revindications of 19th century nation-building ideologies that imagined Argentina as white, European, and Christian also informed such maneuvers.

Beyond the limitations of US-centered AAS there are notable intersections between HAAS and AAS that have shaped my analysis of Asian Argentina. Both fields anchor Asian immigrations in colonial encounters that shaped the Americas, and Asian American scholars like Henry Yu (2001), Rhacel Parreñas and Lok Siu (2007), and Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama (2018) link modern labor migrations and forced displacement to empire building and colonial ventures.⁵¹ Colonialism is indeed one of the unifying themes in the hemisphere and transatlantic population movements in the America's have deep roots in this process. For this reason, Hemispheric Asian American Studies scholars like Maria Zelideth Rivas and Debbie Lee-DiStefano argue in favor of a comparative and intersectional analysis when theorizing and analyzing Asian immigrations because, "[A]n approach that focuses on comparisons and intersections of experiences acknowledges that the process of exclusion is the same in the contexts of

51 Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C.D. Siu, *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007); Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe and Lisa Yoneyama, "Transpacific Entanglements," in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University, 2018).

both North and South America. One can learn from and advance the understanding of these processes by looking at the experiences of Asians in the Americas, from Alaska to Patagonia."⁵² While I disagree that processes of exclusion are the *same* (nor do they have to be in order for scholars to benefit from comparative and intersectional analysis), Rivas and DiStefano underscore that similarities between Asian North America and Latin Asian America exist because of a hemispheric history of imperialism and colonialism. This chapter extends and applies these observations to recent history by centering immigration streams that are not only a byproduct of historical colonial encounters. Colonial-era historiographical accounts may give the impression that heterogeneous Asian populations were *once* part of Latin America, but said populations have either been assimilated through *mestizaje*, or outright excluded by racist policies and persecution. This interpretation leaves us little room to interpret the particularity of contemporary social phenomena. Needless to say, not all exchanges between Asia and Latin America occurred in the context of the 19th century colonial period. Cold War politics and Argentina's neoliberal restructuring in the late 20th century require a departure from this historical frame to yield new insights about contemporary Asian Argentina.

I shift the the historical gaze forward by turning to Iyko Day and Candice Chuh's generative work on Asian processes of racialization in 21st century Asian North America to extrapolate some of these insights to the Argentine case and to underline possible intersections though I will first denote important differences to keep in mind. Firstly, as HAAS scholars have noted, a significant difference between Asian North America and Latin Asian America lies in the varieties of colonialism that shaped nation-states in the

52 Maria Zelideth Rivas and Debbie Lee-DiStefano, eds., *Imagining Asia in the Americas* (New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press, 2016), 3.

South. Portuguese and Spanish colonial systems recognized the reality of miscegenation early in their national developments, apparent in the Spanish *casta* system's dizzying attempts at racial categorization. Miscegenation in Latin America introduced an element of 'flexibility' to racial categorization as opposed to the rigidity of North American settler-colonial systems and their accompanying legal codifications of whiteness.⁵³ This flexibility in racial structures and ideologies is absent in Canada and the US but patterns of racialized Asian labor akin to Argentine contemporary forms of labor and capital maximizing logics have also emerged in the North under neoliberal capital. Day calls these patterns "bifurcation" and Chuh refers to them as "dichotomy." In other words, Asian North American bifurcations and dichotomies in racialized Asian labor resonate with Hu-DeHart and López's argument about the paradigmatic hemispheric case of Chinese immigration as defined by two historical trends; 1) 19th century coolie trade, and 2) 20th century commercially-oriented migrations. Though Asian racialization in the Americas is inflected with national meaning, histories, and temporalities, hemispheric forms of Asian racialization displays patterns useful for examining the relationship between neoliberalism and Asian racialized labor in the North and South in the 21st century.

According to Iyko Day, bifurcation refers to the simultaneity between entrepreneurial migration and low-skilled labor migration patterns present in 21st century Asian North America. In *Alien Capital*, Day analyzes the racialization of skilled, affluent Asian migrants and businessmen alongside the parallel immigration of marginalized, undocumented modern-day Asian "aliens," evoking an old North American anti-Asian

53 Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, 1 (2008):14.

racial epithet.⁵⁴ Simultaneity defines the 21st century's neoliberal regime of "postmodern coolie labor," where Asian racialized labor emerges through dual representations of Asian workers as "high-tech coolies" and/or "colonial/retro coolies."⁵⁵ Day argues that Asian racialization in North America acquires meaning by pinning and projecting neoliberal capitalism's abstract and destructive qualities onto Asian subjects. After the US's 1965 Immigration Act, the Yellow Peril trope and emerging Asian racialization processes bifurcated. Day tracks this historical change in the presence of dominant representations and discourses which argue that affluent Asians are "taking over," while marginalized Asians are "taking over our jobs." Thus, according to Day, bifurcation is a particular characteristic of Asian racialization. What is so appealing and innovative about Day's theorization is that she moves past derivative racialization models in Asian North America that present Asian racialization as a byproduct of the US-based, black-white racial dyad and its constitutive foundational antiblackness.⁵⁶ Day's comparative lens reveals that Asian racialization displays patterns that are not subordinate to chattel slavery, a constitutive institution in US racial scripts yet absent from the Canadian settler-colonial context. Rather than conceiving of Asian racialization as an analogical process that positions Asian racialization as shifting along a continuum of whiteness and blackness, bifurcation demonstrates the multiplicity and multidimensionality of North American racial ideologies and racism when it comes to Asian ethnicities.

In a similar vein, Kandice Chuh contends that Asian racialization is an outcome of capital's current conjuncture. As the American Century demises and sees its global

54 Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

55 *Ibid.*, 174.

56 *Ibid.*, 23.

influence eclipsed by powers like China and India, the Asian Century threatens US hegemony on the global stage. According to Chuh, this neoliberal geopolitical conjuncture produces a dichotomy between Asian capital and the Asian marginal worker since, "...contemporary capitalism has underwritten both the mobilization of low-wage Asian labor, primarily women, and those of the managerial class bearing "flexible citizenship," in Aihwa Ong's terms."⁵⁷ Because Asia has become a sign of geopolitics, and US-Asia relations have historically impacted the racialization of Asians in the US, Asian racialization in the 21st century is defined by a dichotomy that hides the colonial relations that historically produced Asianness in North America. By presenting some Asian subjects as having achieved "equality" through a model minority and model modernity trope, older colonial forms of racialization are animated while, at the same time, being rendered obsolete.⁵⁸ In Chuh's conceptualization of Asian racialization as dichotomy, the model minority trope operates by justifying inequality while evading the persistence of material inequality among Asian Americans and neutralizes critiques of Asian racialization since Asians as a group are portrayed as having "transcended" race and 19th century forms of racist exclusion.

To summarize, Chuh and Day insist that 21st century paradigms of Asian North American racialization are dichotomous, bifurcated, and multiple. These nuances and specificity structure Canada's and the US's relationship to domestic and immigrant Asian populations. The dichotomy and bifurcation models point to differential forms of inclusion in Asian North America by reflecting the particularity in Asian racialization, formerly discussed only as analogical to the US's whiteness/blackness dyad. Day and

57 Kandice Chuh, "Asians are the New...What?," *Flaspoints for Asian American Studies*. Ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018: 220-237.

58 *Ibid.*, 228.

Chuh's models of bifurcation and dichotomy do not transpose directly onto Asian Latin America because the racialization of Asian Argentines, for instance, is not captured in representations of their alleged assimilation into the nation or the economic success of a few (as in the model minority myth), nor in Yellow Peril modalities of outright racist exclusion targeting Asians. Asian North American racialization is shaped by neoliberal multiculturalism, an ideological device that hides ongoing material disparities and stratifies difference according to "model" racialized citizens and non-deserving others. Material disparities manifest in the parallel and simultaneous production of Asian dispossession and exploitation alongside the perceived threat of highly-skilled, affluent Asian immigrant and non-immigrant subjects. Asian dispossession exists alongside the presence of "high-tech coolie labor" and its concomitant representations of model minority citizens through the persistence of "retro-coolie" and feminized, low-wage forms of labor which are naturalized.

As discussed, Hemispheric Asian American Studies emphasizes relationality and intersections in the North and the South while balancing a historical perspective attuned to national and local nuance. 21st century Asian North American forms of racialization intersect with Asian Argentine modes of racialization if we follow the connective thread of dispossessive neoliberal capitalism. The trends in Asian racialized labor that Day and Chuh point to are present hemispherically, even when the internal logics of Asian North American racialization are not equivalent to those of Latin Asian America. The bifurcation and dichotomy models described by Chuh and Day are specific to the North and underscore the racialized logic behind the dispossession of Asians in North America. Bifurcated and dichotomized racialization relies on Orientalism to produce

representations such as the model-minority to hide inequalities among Asian immigrants and native populations. The model-minority trope invisibilizes Asian exploitation and marginalization while neoliberal multiculturalism naturalizes this same exploitation by locating racial inequality in the past, making the inequality of today appear as a product of individual (ir)responsibility and depoliticizing it. The following section delves deeper into national forms of racial formation in Argentina to then show how Lao racialization is characterized by excess. I argue that this excess forecasts forms of neoliberal dispossession now broadly found throughout disempowered cities in provincial Argentina, such as Posadas. My emphasis on disempowered cities stems from the proposition that heterogeneous racialized majorities and othered populations reside in these localities. Although these populations and cities are portrayed as “peripheral” in Argentine metropolitan-based representations of the nation, they offer a case study of the unique urban forms produced under 21st century neoliberal capitalism. And part of my argument is that they are not “marginal” in the common-sense of the word, but central to comprehending emerging Latin American urbanisms generally-speaking.

The Case for Asian Argentina

My discussion of Asian Argentina is grounded on Argentine feminist anthropologist Rita Segato’s theorization of dense difference. My work traces historical antagonisms that produce forms of Asian racialized difference in Argentina by focusing on the experiences of Lao refugees and Segato’s work clarifies the background in which this process unfolds. In her theorizations of race and alterity in Argentina, Rita Segato (2007) holds that *mestizaje* is a Latin American racial ideological variety of whiteness,

blanquedad. Segato argues that a whitened mestizaje ideology, *ideología mestiza blanqueada*, has ruled South America from 1800 onward. This whitened mestizaje ideology experienced a critical moment of “disaggregation” post-1989 when popular social movements questioned the “aggregated,” or cohesive, character of national mestizaje myths by introducing the language of difference. As occurred in other parts of the world, the purported “End of History” and the eventual demise of the Soviet Union marked a paradigm shift in political struggles throughout Latin America which led to a temporary abandonment of 1970s era class-based systemic critiques. As a result, Segato claims, two separate strands of identitarian politics emerged—politicized identitarian communal claims and market-based forms in the key of neoliberal multicultural representation.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ It is difficult to overstate the significance of non-mestizo black and indigenous populations’ increased political activity and visibility in Latin America post-1989. The political mobilizations of the 1990s gave way to conversations about race and dispossession in “raceless” societies. Latin American miscegenated societies have historically prided themselves in their purported historical tolerance and foundational antiracism. To illustrate this disposition many countries can point to their monuments to indigenous leaders, their myriad forms of religious and linguistic syncretism, and their hybrid national cuisines and artistic forms—all vivid expressions of national pride. From

59 Two illuminating cases whereby politicized identitarian claims became visible in the 1990s are Bolivia and Brazil. Both countries have a majority indigenous and Afro-descending population that rose up during this period denouncing the historical antagonisms that produced their racialized difference and dispossession. In conjunction with the Zapatista indigenous uprising (1994) in Southern Mexico, the reemergence of historically marginalized racialized sectors as political actors questions the cynical triumphalism of Fukuyama’s theses. These sectors vehemently opposed the imposition of neoliberal market ideology to all spheres of life in Latin America. In particular, the Zapatistas denounced capital’s further encroachment of indigenous territories which only deepened and multiplied land disputes during this period.

60 Rita L. Segato, “Introducción: Políticas de la identidad, diferencia y formaciones nacionales de alteridad,” in *La nación y sus Otros: Raza, etnicidad y diversidad religiosa en tiempos de Políticas de Identidad*, Rita Laura Segato (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2007), 18-19.

Mexico to Argentina, with varying degrees, the emergence of non-mestizos as political actors challenged the hegemony of a centuries-long held whitened mestizo ideology. Territorially-based and politicized identitarian disputes became a mainstay throughout Latin America during the paradigm shift that Segato calls disaggregation. Once national identities became “disaggregated,” as Segato argues, whitened mestizo ideology lost its capacity to cohere and social and political struggles were articulated in the language of “dense” difference.

The distinction between market-based forms of difference versus dense difference is important because difference is often flattened to a market-based definition. This is the basis for a critique of contemporary diversity. Market difference is in direct opposition to dense difference and Segato distinguishes the two, specifically the dense difference that social movements propose versus the globalized difference of market-based identitarianisms. The latter is promoted by international institutions, multinational corporations, and neoliberal multiculturalisms whose primary allegiance is profit. The problem is that globalized interpretations of difference eradicate and usurp dense difference. They depoliticize it by ascribing a universality of suffering to non-whites and extracting them from the historical antagonisms that produce racialized subjects in the South. Segato is highly critical of universalized definitions of suffering coming from the North, not only because they lack historicity, but because they are often aligned with market goals as defined by US interests and global trans/national elites. Market-based definitions of difference open previously unavailable markets to neoliberal capital, and their faux-inclusion policies emphasize globalized multicultural forms of difference that neutralize dense difference. Instead, globalized ideologies of difference criminalize

struggles articulated in the language of dense communal difference, the language that struggles for racial recognition often rely on.⁶¹

While this chapter identifies similarities in the trajectories, histories, and sociopolitical currents in the North and South, it also recognizes the tensions and risks of defining an “Asian” experience hemispherically. To reiterate, I conceptualize race as dense difference, the outcome of specific and particular historical antagonisms that manifest in Argentina in relation to Lao refugees. These antagonisms create modalities of racial difference which produce communal forms of alterity that, through social struggle, reinsert themselves into the nation’s previously homogenized, or aggregated, temporality.⁶² Lao refugee struggles for recognition in Argentina occur in this historical moment of racial disaggregation and their struggles over housing and citizenship in Misiones translated into claims made in the name of their collective status as refugees, a status that the Argentine state only recognized in the initial phases of refugee resettlement. Refusing to be absorbed into “aggregated” definitions of Argentineness, Lao refugees held on to their status as refugees, dense difference, even as they obtained

61 To illustrate the stakes of Segato’s argument when situating Asian Argentina, I provide the example of Mapuche territorial claims in Patagonia against the multinational company United Colors of Benetton, the Italian-owned fashion label that is also one of the largest landholders in southern Argentina. Globalized neoliberal difference is the ethos behind multicultural companies like Benetton, best known for pioneering the use of non-white models in its 90s campaigns. One of the first companies to seize the multicultural moment, United Colors of Benetton perfectly captures the zeitgeist of globalized difference as its colorful ads presciently display a spectacle of multiracial harmony only true in billboards. Proving that aspirations for multiracial harmony end where private property begins, the Benetton’s have been involved in some of Argentina’s most repressive campaigns against indigenous peoples in recent history and are implicated in the disappearance, eviction, and murder of local Mapuche leaders and supporters. Benetton’s brand of universalized difference perfectly illustrates the incompatibilities that Segato points out between claims made in the language of dense difference versus neoliberal multicultural chimeras that eradicate difference by hollowing it out and celebrating “color” only if it translates into market gains.

62 Rita L. Segato, “Introducción: Políticas de la identidad, diferencia y formaciones nacionales de alteridad,” in *La nación y sus Otros: Raza, etnicidad y diversidad religiosa en tiempos de Políticas de Identidad*, Rita Laura Segato (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2007), 22.

Argentine citizenship in the 1990s with many continuing their struggle for housing well into the aughts.

Like Segato argues, the post-1989 Latin American rupture had a disaggregative effect in Argentina that also exposed the limits of racial flexibility in national mestizaje myths. Though Argentina did not institutionalize mestizaje as a foundational ideology in its national identity, the Argentine *crisol de razas* narrative speaks to the influence that immigration has on conceptions of national identity. According to Segato, the *crisol de razas* narrative functions as a “straight jacket” by preventing othered populations from accessing full citizenship rights by disavowing the existence of alterity all together and invalidating claims made in the language of dense difference.⁶³ As discussed, Buenos Aires-based conceptions of Argentineness are synonymous with boat mythology and continue to be hegemonic. The *crisol de razas* narrative is more salient throughout Argentine provinces and, like discussed in the introduction, it is the prevailing myth used to define the character of Misiones province. Analogous to the US melting pot myth, the *crisol de razas* refers to the idea of racial “amalgamation,” or “aggregation,” into a unified and cohesive nation. Similarities notwithstanding, Segato preemptively warns against transposing US-based ideas about the melting pot to the Argentine *crisol de razas* variant. Segato identifies Argentine particularity in the role that “ethnic terror” has played in the country since the 19th century. According to her, ethnic terror is the effect of porteño (Buenos Aires-based) elite rule which has infused national identity with a deeply territorial and spatial dimension in its centuries-long state control. Porteño ethnic terror is anchored in the binary of civilization/barbarism which distinguishes the metropolis from Argentine provinces; the city appears as civilized and ethnically neutral whereas

63 Ibid., 25.

particularity and barbarism reside outside its borders.⁶⁴ This differs from the US context because 20th century urbanization patterns have ascribed threat, vice, and criminality to urban centers vis-a-vis white suburban enclaves, for instance. This has changed over time and points to the ways that the relationship between race and urban space is more flexible in the US. Additionally, race in the US is often equated with ethnicity and culture and is a biologically deterministic concept that fetishizes genetic purity, not miscegenation, as a means to whiten the nation. US-based notions of genetic purity have been historically reinforced and policed through de-facto and de-jure segregationist policies while race in Argentina operates without an overt and intricate legal scaffolding.

Coinciding with Segato's theorizations of dense difference and race, which she defines as signifying historical dispossession—a sign that brands and categorizes human bodies according to the social positions they historically have occupied—I write about Argentine racial ideologies as the product of porteño ethnic terror. Ethnic terror produces national formations of alterity which create dense forms of difference (i.e. race) throughout the provinces. Lest Argentine and US racialization appear similar, Chisu Teresa Ko (2016) succinctly summarizes the most significant difference as follows, “[T]he United States imposes white hegemony through explicit racial exclusions and classifications, while Argentina imposes white hegemony through the omission of racial classifications and a discourse that insisted on a homogenous European ancestry.”⁶⁵ Considering that European immigration to Argentina in the 19th century resembled US-bound flows of European immigration, this historical similarity is sometimes cited as evidence for making the case that Argentina and the US share more societal similarities

64 Ibid., 30.

65 Chisu Teresa Ko, “Toward Asian Argentine Studies,” *Latin American Research Review* 51, 4 (2016): 273.

in their settler-colonial trajectories than they do. While some parallels may be drawn, they are outweighed by the differences in both countries' national histories and popular struggles. I begin with Segato's theory of race and Ko's distinctions between Argentine and US racial formations to settle this debate. This preempts false analogies given the dominance of US-based Asian American Studies in the academic study of Asian racialization.

Chisu Teresa Ko's provocative article entitled "Toward Asian Argentine Studies" articulates the challenges faced by those of us interested in Asian Argentina and argues in favor of expanding the HAAS framework and including the Argentine case.⁶⁶ In spite of the field's prolific output about Latin Asian America, HAAS has produced remarkably few studies about Asian populations in Argentina. Ko ventures an answer for this void by maintaining that the absence attests to the power Argentine national narratives hold in the hemispheric imaginary. Additionally, she points out that, "...the absence of Asian Argentines from academic research today is at odds with their striking visibility and changing symbolic meanings in contemporary culture. Moreover, the underdevelopment of Asian Argentine studies is inconsistent with the expanding research on Argentina's race and ethnicity."⁶⁷ Ko's call for an Asian Argentine Studies coincides with a heightened interest in non-European migratory flows in the Argentine political agenda and national media. The academy has also begun to cursorily include discussions about Asian populations living in Buenos Aires. Noting the largest Asian populations in the country—Chinese, Japanese and Korean—Ko notes that academics over rely on the ethnic "*colectividades*" (collectivities) approach when writing about Asian Argentines.

66 Ibid., 271-272.

67 Ibid., 271.

The *colectividades* framework emphasizes these groups' externality to Argentina by focusing on each *colectividad*'s relationship with their countries of origin and co-ethnics, while overlooking inter-Asian Argentine relationships and Asian Argentine participation in domestic affairs.⁶⁸ Although the *colectividades* framework has been useful in initiating overdue conversations about Asians in Argentina, Ko makes the case for the need to introduce the category Asian Argentine to complement a co-ethnic focus and to emphasize that Asian populations are also a part of Argentine society. The category Asian Argentine is an intentional move away from the marginalizing, encapsulating, and externalizing *colectividad* discourse that can only "see" Asians if they are placed outside of Argentineness. Influenced by Yen Le Espiritu's seminal work on Asian panethnicity in the US, Ko importantly points out that panethnic identity is not yet a popular claim in Argentina nor has it been institutionalized by the state. It is also not used by Asian populations to self-describe. I commonly encountered Lao refugees and their children referring to themselves both as Lao and *criollo* to talk about their identifications. By introducing a panethnic analytical category like Asian Argentine Ko underscores the potential for identifying shared histories of discrimination in Argentina. These shared histories would visibilize forms of Argentine Orientalism that remain outside the predominant *colectividades* framework.

Ko's case for Asian Argentine Studies emphasizes the shared experiences of discrimination faced by various Asian populations. I expand this by elaborating that place, along with race and class, is intertwined in Argentine racial scripts. These racial scripts have led to different representational forms for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Lao populations which reflect their segmented positions in the Argentine labor market.

68 Ibid., 272.

To illustrate, Japanese immigrants and their descendants are overrepresented in the *tintorerias* (small dry cleaning businesses) of Buenos Aires while Korean immigrants predominantly occupy the garment manufacturing sector in the barrios of Once and Flores. Chinese immigrants are overrepresented in the supermarket business and real state ventures throughout Buenos Aires. Although these three major groups have also settled throughout Argentine provinces, they are mostly concentrated in Buenos Aires and have left an imprint in neighborhoods throughout the city. As my discussion of Argentine racial ideologies has pointed out, racial meaning in Argentina is deeply spatial. Segato's theorization of porteño ethnic terror supports this claim by reminding us that historically, Argentine national identity has a territorial dimension whereby difference refracts through ideas about civilization and barbarism. Barbarism resides *outside* Buenos Aires. The capital is still imagined to be ethnically neutral notwithstanding demographic shifts and an increased presence of East Asians throughout the city. This grafting of racial meaning onto territory has implications for the racialization of different Asian groups, since Chinese and Korean immigrants have historically settled in Buenos Aires while Lao populations settled in provinces elsewhere. Xenophobic and racist incidents in Buenos Aires targeting ethnic enclaves are common and express outrage at the presence of Korean script in building facades, for example. Lao refugees reported experiencing racial profiling when entering stores and public venues in Posadas, though no one reported that their neighborhoods were targeted for "infringing" on the character of Posadas in the same way that Chinese and Korean neighborhoods have been a topic of public debate in Buenos Aires. In fact, the UNHCR intentionally grouped Lao refugees together in the early years of resettlement and the EBY designated specific housing complexes for Lao

refugees during the Yacyretá dam's relocation programs in Posadas setting the groundwork for the establishment of today's Lao neighborhoods.

In making the case for a panethnic category of Asian Argentina I concur with Ko that there are shared histories of discrimination among Asian immigrants in Argentina. After all, the military dictatorship understood race as a relational category when it cited positive experiences with other Asian immigrants groups, Japanese rural migrants in particular, when making the case for Lao refugee resettlement to its provinces. The state's cross referencing of some Asian ethnicities to justify policy decisions towards others supports arguments about the existence of Argentine forms of Orientalism that influence how Asian people are perceived and treated throughout the country. There is a need to elaborate more about how these forms affect people's everyday lives and their ability to secure housing, work, and other necessities. I find it analytically useful to group distinct trajectories of Asian immigrants, and while I concur with Ko that there are shared histories of discrimination among them, I also insist that class and territory inform modes of Asian racialization. The settlement patterns of Asian immigrants have created inter-Asian hierarchies that are relevant to understanding Asian immigrant participation in broader Argentine society. Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, the existence of inter-Asian hierarchies in Argentina merits more discussion. Most of the Lao refugees I spoke with mentioned that they once worked in Korean-owned factories sewing clothes or that they bought clothes wholesale from Koreans to sell for a small profit. For many years after their initial arrival to Posadas Lao refugees peddled clothes all over Misiones province to earn a living. They woke up at 4am and returned home at 8pm. Lao

connections to Korean wholesale distributors in Buenos Aires have endured and Pedro Khamchanh's story is illustrative here.

I met with Pedro (born in Entre Rios, 1980) multiple times in Argentina. First, in July 2015 in Buenos Aires with the help of his sister Maria Saenthavisouk whom I met in New York City in April of that same year. Maria and Pedro put me in contact with their father, Palani Khamchanh, who negotiated housing units in the Yohasá neighborhood for approximately 87 Lao refugee families after a long conflict with the EBY. Palani is a well-respected figure in the Lao community of Posadas and he introduced me to other Lao refugees in the city. When I met Pedro in 2018 at his father's home in Barrio Yohasá, Pedro, Palani, and Esther Martinez (Palani's mixed race Lao-Argentine partner) were making a living selling clothes. They had a family-run informal business that tied Paraguay, Posadas, and Buenos Aires. After working for Korean employers many years, Pedro began his own clothing label with the support of a Korean investor. With Esther and Palani's help, Pedro buys garments wholesale from Encarnación, Paraguay (across the border from Posadas) with money from the Korean investor in Buenos Aires. Esther is the *burrera*—the woman who smuggles the clothes from Encarnacion to Posadas—sometimes making up to 4 trips per day and then shipping some of the clothes by bus to Buenos Aires. Once in the capital, Pedro sells them for a profit and gives a percentage to his Korean contact. Esther keeps a couple of items to sell from the front of her home in Yohasá. In their master theses about Lao resettlement in Misiones, Posadeño

anthropologists Luis Roberto Baez and Romina Elena Zulpo noted the importance of family-based informal networks in solving the perennial issue of unemployment.⁶⁹

Chronic job insecurity and precarity are dominant themes I encountered while talking with refugees. One my arguments is that Lao refugees eventually took root in Posadas because the city's border condition enabled life-sustaining informal activities which made it possible for many families to survive. Because many Lao refugees and their descendants have primarily been occupied in the informal sector, they often found work with Koreans who were some of the only people willing to offer them work. For many first-generation Lao like Pedro, working for Korean factories in Buenos Aires gave them their first job experiences as underage workers. Few Lao Argentines were able to continue their studies beyond high-school or secondary school and had to support their families financially. The rapid growth of Chinese immigration in the last three decades has positioned Chinese-owned businesses as sources of employment as well for Lao refugees and first-generation Lao.

Veronica Junyoung Kim's literary and cultural analyses about Korean immigration to Buenos Aires points to the contradictory position Korean immigrants occupy in the capital city. Taking the 1985 South Korea-Argentina immigration agreement as a point of departure, Kim shows that Koreans' entrepreneurial activities secured them visas upon arrival and provided Korean immigrants with a relatively secure financial footing. The 1985 agreement provided Korean families with immigrant visas for

69 Luis Roberto Baez, "Relatos de un Desplazamiento: Laosianos Refugiados en Posadas" (Masters thes., Universidad Nacional de Misiones, 2013. 125-126.; Romina Elena Zulpo, "Memoria e Identidad. Del Sudeste de Asia a Posadas" (Masters thes., Universidad Nacional de Misiones, 2012.

a minimum deposit of \$30,000 that would later be returned upon their arrival.⁷⁰ The Korean immigrants Kim interviewed were aware of their financially superior position in relation to Argentines; a fact leading to economic resentment and mistrust from mainstream Argentine society. Kim quotes a Korean business owner, “When Argentines are racist toward me, I just feel sorry for them. I make more money in a year than they will ever see in their lifetime.”⁷¹ This sentiment was echoed by other interviewees and also shows that Korean immigrants’ economic solvency has not translated to greater social inclusion. Although Asian inter-ethnic hierarchies are not the focus of this chapter, I hope to continue theorizations of place, space, and broader Asian racialization in future work. For now I focus on how settlement in Posadas influenced the trajectories of Lao refugees and use it as a point of departure for thinking about racialization beyond Buenos Aires-based understandings of race. Lao refugees in Posadas do not enjoy the same economic status as Koreans in Buenos Aires, for example, and Lao racialization in Misiones does not posit them as an economic threats nor as competition to mainstream Argentine society which has afforded them the possibility to build neighborhoods without being racially targeted for “encroaching” on the city.

“Laotians without a destiny”: The Maladapted Refugee as a Racial Project

Lao racialization emerges in a moment of socio political crisis in Argentina characterized by dictatorship-era racial ideologies seeking to revive 19th century Eurocentric visions of the nation. Throughout the nineties and aughts, racialized Lao

70 Junyoung Veronica Kim, “Disrupting the “White Myth”: Korean Immigration to Buenos Aires and National Imaginaries,” in *Imagining Asia in the Americas*, eds. Maria Zelideth Rivas and Debbie Lee-DiStefano (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 44

71 *Ibid.*, 46.

representations then refract through a neoliberal multicultural lens that straddles exclusion and inclusion. The rise of multiculturalism throughout Latin America and Argentina in the 1990s made conversations about demographic heterogeneity possible and the *colectividades* framework is a product of its time in this regard. Despite its good intent the *colectividades*' understanding of difference places refugees outside mainstream conceptions of Argentiness. This framework is often preferred to alternatives that presuppose homogeneity but it depoliticizes the demographic changes initiated during the dictatorship era's growing economic relations with East Asian countries.

The specificity of Lao refugee racialization is that it arises during an intense moment of tension characterized by the contradictions between the dictatorship's nation building goals and its neoliberal economic program which included courting immigration from Southeast and East Asia. The representation of Lao refugees as maladapted consolidated just a year after their arrival when refugees abandoned their original resettlement sites. These desertions challenged the Southeast Refugee Resettlement program's residency requirement which stipulated that the Lao could not reside within 100 kilometers (approximately 62 miles) of the capital of Buenos Aires. By abandoning their original resettlement sites and moving into hotels throughout Buenos Aires in the 1980s, a handful of refugee families defied restrictions on their mobility and the representation of the "maladapted refugee" emerged as a racial project and would accompany Lao refugees for decades.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that racial projects do the ideological and practical work of linking racial formation processes to social structure and racial signification. Omi and Winant define a racial project as, "simultaneously an

interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines.”⁷² In the case of Lao refugees, the racial project visible in the construction of “maladapted” refugees illuminates a labor maximizing logic in the Argentine state’s approach to Asian immigrations though a capital maximizing logic is more clearly expressed in the other groups’ trajectories. Argentina’s deepening ties with Asia during the dictatorship period had to do with the country’s need for both capital and labor in a Cold War context whereby the junta looked to alternative geographies beyond Europe, the Soviet Union, or the US. The junta’s decision was partly due to its precarious position internationally after the detrimental effects the Dirty War and the Malvinas War had on the Argentine military government. Thus, the dictatorship’s decision to welcome entrepreneurs, refugees, and workers from Asia departed from Argentina’s historical and ideological reliance on European immigrant labor in the late 19th and early 20th century as a means to modernize the nation. The recruitment of East Asian capital and labor had a commercial and economic orientation and its non-ideological character differentiates it from earlier approaches towards Europe looking to “*mejorar la raza*,” improve the race . While in power, the dictatorship encouraged Asian investment from China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan and this chapters’ major contribution is situating the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program within this broad trend as part of a historical effort to supply small agricultural enterprises located in “underpopulated” provinces with refugee-workers. For this reason, chapter two focuses on the importance of thinking about the

72 Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 2015): 125.

refugee as worker and showcases the various labor actions Lao refugee-workers took part in to respond to the forms of exploitation they encountered upon resettlement.

In October 1981 Clarin newspaper published the disdainful headline “*Laosianos sin destino*” (Laotians without a destiny) next to a picture of a Lao child sitting on the sidewalk. The article detailed the hotel *desalojos*, evictions, of refugee families that happened in Buenos Aires two years after their arrival. This headline showcases the kinds of representations that accompanied articles about Lao refugees once their relationship to the Argentine state soured. By late 1981 dozens of Lao families abandoned their resettlement sites throughout the Argentine provinces unhappy with the lodging, working conditions, and poor remuneration. Some refugee families returned to Buenos Aires to demand that the UNHCR resettle them elsewhere. More than a dozen families lived in pensions paid for temporarily by the UNHCR in Buenos Aires after leaving their resettlement locations. The families demands included repatriation to Laos, which proved nearly impossible since the Lao government considered them traitors. Refugees also demanded to be reunited with extended family members in Europe and the United States, but this was not an option as resettlement in Argentina sought to relieve the resettlement pressures felt by Europe and the US after the end of the Vietnam War. Lao refugees failed to express ‘gratitude’ when they denounced that the wages and living conditions UN officials had promised them in Thai refugee camps did not materialize. According to refugees, UN representatives had promised a salary of \$360 per month for each family, access to water, food, electricity, and medical care for three years. These unmet conditions led refugee families to demand improved living conditions, and, in some cases, repatriation. Refugee grievances were met with a similar contempt, antipathy, and

sometimes the same epithets leveraged against Argentines who leveraged social economic critiques. Interestingly, the term *inadaptado*, maladapted, used for refugees was also used against Argentine leftists and Lao cultural differences were quickly treated as causal explanations for their so-called “inability to adapt” to Argentine society.

By late 1981 many Lao refugee families living in month-to-month pension rentals in Buenos Aires had been residing there for up to six months until the UNHCR stopped making payments. The Clarin article provides details of a scene from one of the multiple evictions which followed. Buenos Aires police ousted 26 adults and 13 Lao refugee children who had been lodged in a hotel located on Tacuari 1700 in the working class barrio of Constitucion. This particular eviction involved families that had abandoned their work sites in Misiones and refugees interviewed by Clarin continued to denounce that the UNHCR failed to pay their rent and that repatriation talks broke down with no clear solutions. Buenos Aires was not the only city to see such evictions. Other families also abandoned their resettlement sites and traveled to Buenos Aires province to face homelessness in nearby cities like Avellaneda. I encountered accounts about these evictions while doing oral histories in Posadas. Kye Genevong’s memories from this period reflect its cruelty, conflict, and why some people remain ambivalent to discuss the Buenos Aires desalojos with outsiders.

I interviewed Kye (61) outside his home in Barrio Fatima where he lives with his Argentine wife and children. He currently works from home as a masseuse and is the only Lao refugee living in Barrio Fatima, located in the neighboring municipality of Garupá. Garupá is an outgrowth of Posadas and the last neighborhood to house families displaced from El Brete by the Yacyretá Dam. In 2010 Kye was among the last lucky

families granted a home by the EBY (Yacyretá Binational Entity) after a long fight with the organization. Kye left Laos at age twenty and was initially sent to Santa Fe province in 1980 until he left for Buenos Aires to protest resettlement conditions alongside his paisanos. This is how he recalls that period:

Viví juntos y trabajando juntos más o menos un año (en Santa Fé). Después nosotros volver a capital Buenos Aires. Nos ayuda de Naciones Unidas y pagaba hotel en capital (1980), Paseo 50, Hotel Piedras, Tacuarí y Hotel San Juan... tiene después otro hotel, cómo se llama? No recuerdo, más o menos 5 hoteles. Después yo empezar trabajando en la capital para mantener mi familia. Trabajar empresa de suco, sí, suco. Yo manejando la máquina, más o menos un año o dos por ahí en la capital. El 81. Después tiene problemas, que gobierno quiere cirujar nosotros en la capital entonces el grupo de nosotros luchando y pedir ayuda de embajada de EE.UU.. Van todos enfrente de embajada de EE.UU. después empezar quilombo. Yo estar en Paseo 50 y otros estar en Hotel Catamayo. Empezar la quilombo y militar, policía, gendarmeria y prefectura...

(Al inicio del resentamiento) Hay varias familias que manda trabajo para comida (el gobierno argentino). No paga (el empleador). Y algunos manda a criar chanchos, en el campo, entonces nosotros pedir por lo menos trabajo digno para nosotros como ellos (argentinos) hablan cuando estan en campo de refugiados de Tailandia. "Tiene ayuda, tanto, tanto" dice (oficiales argentinos en Nong Kai) que ayuda comida, ayuda plata para nosotros. Y cuando llegar (a Argentina) se ve poco tiempo nomas, cuando alquilar hotel. Después ellos (Naciones Unidas) dar plata para comprar comida y remedia con ello todo. Después se cortó. Quiere sacar nosotros (para) volver a provincia.

Después tiene problemas porque ellos (argentinos) quiere cirujar nosotros. Entonces nosotros cuando viene primero (cuando llega gendarmería a hoteles), loco, (nosotros) no sabe idioma y no sabe qué ellos (gendarmería, policía) van a hacer. Nosotros pensar que ellos van a matar entonces nosotros luchamos. Antes de morir tenés que luchar.

Después (desalojos) empezar más o menos a las tres de la mañana. A las 2-3 de la mañana. Cuando silencio, ellos quieren venir a sacar nosotros. Entonces causa problema,

accidente. Hotel Catamayo, mi amigo esta ahí. Cuando ellos (policía) bajar el ascensor, el hijo esta mirando y poner la cabeza el ascensor y viene el ascensor y aplastar (hijo de su amigo). El niño cae abajo y se rompió toda la cabeza. Yo con mis manos fuí, a sacarlo con mis manos, sangrando todo el cerebro, pegado en todos lados. Hijo de mi amigo. Un paisano. Eran todos (gendarmeria, policia, militares) con palos con fusil a desalojar violentamente.

Después cuando ellos sacar todo, se quedo la familia de mi amigo ahí (del niño del ascensor) y después el gobierno no sé, da trabajo (a su amigo). Hasta ahora ahí vive en Buenos Aires. En Once.....

Sufrimos mucho nosotros. Después cuando saca (el gobierno de la) capital y nos manda allá en la prefectura de Santa Fé a un galpón. Y tiene guardia todo (el galpón) donde están las familias. Como prisionero.

Ese fue un tiempo horrible, ese fue un tiempo feo.

We lived together and worked together (in Santa Fe) for about a year. Then we return to the capital Buenos Aires.

We get help from UN and (the UN) payed for a hotel in the capital. Paseo 50, Hotel Piedras, Tacuari and Hotel San Juan, there's another hotel, what's it called? I don't remember, there's about 5 hotels. Then I start working in the capital to provide (for) my family. Work for a juice company, yes, juice. Driving a machine, about one or two years somewhere in the capital. That's 81. Then have problems, that government wants to jack us in the capital, so we fight and ask the US Embassy for help. We all go in front of the US Embassy and the ruckus starts, the military, the police and gendarmerie and prefecture....

There's many families that (the Argentine government) sends to work for food. (The employer) Doesn't pay. And some are sent to raise swine, in the fields, so then we at least ask for dignified work like they (Argentines) talk when they're at the refugee camp in Thailand. "You have help, this much, this much" they say (Argentine officials in Nong Kai) that they help with food, with cash for us. And when (we) arrive (to Argentina) we only see (for) little time, with hotel rental. Then they (UNHCR) give money to buy food and make things better. Then that's over. Want to get us out, return to province.

After have problems because they (Argentines) want to jack us. Then when (gendarmerie, police) first come, crazy, (we) don't know language and (we) don't know what they are going to do. We think that they are going to kill so we fight. Before you die you have to fight. Then (evictions) begin around three in the morning. At 2-3 in the morning. When it's silent, they want to come to get us out. Then (they) cause problems, accident. Hotel Catamayo, my friend is there. When they (police) lower the elevator the son is looking and puts his head elevator (inside the slot) and the elevator comes and smashes (his son's friend). The boy falls down and breaks his whole head. I went there, with my hands, to take him out with my hands, brain bleeding sticking everywhere. My friend's son. A paisano. They all (gendarmerie, police, military) were with sticks and rifle to evict violently.

Then when they take everything out, my friend's family stayed there and then the government, I don't know, gives work (to his friend). He lives in Buenos Aires until now. In (the neighborhood) Once....

We suffered a lot. Then after (government gets us) out of capital and sends (us) over there to the Santa Fe prefecture to a lot. And (the lot) has guards everywhere with the families. Like a prisoner.

That was a horrible time. That was an ugly time.

Not everyone was as willing as Kye Genevong to share details about the evictions that took place in Buenos Aires. A lot of refugees understandably did not want to be on the record criticizing the government and the UNHCR, or retelling some aspects of their early life in Argentina. Tensions with discussing these painful memories with outsiders would continue throughout my stay. Sonia Lopez (32), the Guarani wife of Songkram Ornpaeng (50), once explained why some refugees were hesitant to talk to me on the record:

Ellos (los mayores) tienen mucho miedo de todo lo que fue los militares en ese momento ya que hubo en muchas ocasiones abuso de autoridad. Ellos tienen miedo a eso. De todo lo que es fuerzas (armadas). Cuando vos venís a preguntar de esos conflictos que pasarón hace rato, ellos ya te ven de otra forma, porque vos hablas de un conflicto que paso hace rato. Entonces ¿quién dice que lo que vos estás escribiendo, o vas a escribir, más adelante no les haga a ellos perder algo? Perder algo en qué sentido—

Ahora ya son pensionados, ahora ya son jubilados porque ya pasó más de 30 años en el país. Ahora tienen sus casas, sus familias, sus hijos. Pasarón a otra página entonces para que eso (pasado) ya quede guardado, y todo lo que ellos comentan, por ahí antes se hacían fogones y se comentaban entre ellos la experiencia, lo que pasaban. Pero sí, tienen mucho miedo.

They (the elders) are very scared about everything having to do with the military at that time because there was abuse of power on many occasions. They are scared of that. Of everything having to do with the armed forces. When you come and ask about conflicts that happened a long time ago, they see you differently, because you are talking about a conflict that happened a long time ago. Then, who says that what you are writing, or will write, will not make them loose something sometime in the future? Loose something in which sense—Now they're retirees, now they're retired because they spent more than 30 years in the country. Now they have their homes, families, and children. They turned the page so that (the past) would remain stowed away. And everything they say.... Before, sometimes they'd light fires

and talk amongst themselves about their experience, what they went through. But yes, they're very scared.

The *desalojos* are significant in Lao history for two reasons. Firstly, the experiences from these events cemented the representations of Lao refugees in the media as maladapted for having defied movement restrictions and because they appeared “ungrateful.” Secondly, this period also served as a catalyst for rerouting families to Posadas, which became identified as the next best location to go to given the city’s geographical and weather characteristics—hot and humid tropical weather and adjacent to the Parana River. Indeed, the hotel evictions signal an important event in Lao memory and history and they remain a painful and traumatic memory for its survivors.⁷³

Accounts that commemorate the arrival of Lao refugees to Argentina often emphasize Lao refugees’ individual life stories and exclude analysis of the refugees’ marginalized and precarious positions after resettlement. These vignettes often rely on the concept of culture as an explanatory factor for poverty and financial deprivation. When a collective Lao experience *is* accounted for in contemporary media, it is only in terms of the *colectividades* framework that Ko rightly critiques as externalizing and othering. As Ko demonstrates, Asian racialization is constructed outside of Argentine national identity

73 In 1981 Jorge Rafael Videla enacted the General Law of Migration and Promotion of Immigration. The law’s emphasis was border control and security. At the same time that Argentina was liberalizing its immigration approach towards East Asia, it put in place stricter controls towards neighboring Latin American countries. The hotel evictions that happened in Buenos Aires took place in a highly militarized environment where restrictive and criminalizing policies were also being deployed against undocumented migrants residing in the same working class and working poor areas where the refugees were lodged. The hotel evictions occurred at the same time that Videla’s government forcibly evicted thousands of poor slum dwellers from the villa miserias surrounding the capital of Buenos Aires. These massive slum evictions speak to the social climate of the moment and demonstrate that Videla’s forces were equally brutal and ready to implement the harshest measures to fulfill the dictatorship’s plans to “clean-up” the capital and modernize the city building highways were slum dwellings once laid.

and is defined by excess because it cannot be amalgamated into boat mythology—an iteration of the porteño ethnic terror which Segato theorized. According to Segato, porteño ethnic terror refers to the ways Buenos Aires-based elites succeeded in producing an Argentine national identity with deep territorial and spatial dimensions that rests on the idea that civilization resides in the metropolis and barbarism is found outside of it.⁷⁴

The representation of maladapted refugees in this context has an excessive character in the Argentine national imaginary. Veronica Junyoung Kim argues that Asianness' excess fractures what she terms Argentina's "white myth"—a myth in which whiteness, unlike other countries in the Americas, *does not* always guarantee economic mobility or financial solvency.⁷⁵ Asian racialized excess can manifest in contradictory ways as in the case of Korean immigrants whose excessive racial characteristics do not preclude economic mobility and solvency. This economic mobility speaks to the Argentine state's capital maximizing logic which is then used as a justification for Argentine forms of racism against Koreans.⁷⁶ Although Lao refugees are not situated in

74 Anarchist historian Osvaldo Bayer wrote that Argentina is a "*país de dos velocidades*," a country of two speeds, with a slow-paced temporality ruling the lives of the excluded and marginalized majorities whereas populations integrated into the metropolis experience a compression of time and its associated perks, they reap the fruits of high urbanity. Bayer wrote about the parallels between the Argentine junta's *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization) and the 19th century program it was named after, the *Proceso de Organización Nacional* (Process of National Organization) under the command of General Roca. In 1889 General Roca's government oversaw the infamous *Campaña del Desierto*, the desert campaign, a genocidal program that displaced and killed indigenous populations in the Patagonia region through land appropriations and colonizing plans for substituting indigenous residents with Europeans. Bayer called this settler-colonial genocidal campaign a "*genocidio constituyente*" because, according to him, genocide is a constitutive process through which all other power relations emanate from in the Argentine state. The junta aligned its own political and economic program after General Roca's *Campaña*, thereby vindicating the constitutive genocide that took place in Argentina at the turn of the 19th century. See Osvaldo Bayer, *La Patagonia rebelde*, (Buenos Aires: Booklet, 2004).

75 Junyoung Veronica Kim, "Disrupting the "White Myth": Korean Immigration to Buenos Aires and National Imaginaries," in *Imagining Asia in the Americas*, eds. Maria Zelideth Rivas and Debbie Lee-DiStefano (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 35.

76 In "Disrupting the "White Myth"" Kim points to the importance of relationality and regional racial formations by elaborating the difference between the social perceptions of Japanese immigrants and Koreans in the city of Buenos Aires. Japanese immigrants and Japanese Argentines are not accused of

the same structural position as Korean immigrants they have nevertheless been located in a realm of excess through their racialization. In Posadas, Lao refugees have not been targeted as economic threats because Posadas' border condition makes such claims difficult to sustain in a public discourse whose main target are Paraguayan workers "taking" Argentine jobs. The inclusion of Lao refugees into the dominant *crisol de razas* narrative prevalent in Misiones is ambiguous.

The presence of Asian immigrants and refugees destabilizes state-led claims of a Europeanized Argentine national identity and has a disaggregating effect because, unless it fictionalizes the migratory origins of Lao refugees as voluntary forms of immigration, Lao refugees cannot be integrated neatly into the mythical Argentine *criollo* whole. Ultimately, my case for Asian panethnicity is a conceptual and analytical intervention that expands the meaning of race in contemporary Argentina that also makes room for the divergences between Asian immigrant trajectories in the country by identifying the labor and capital maximizing logics underpinning them and the importance of regional racial formations when discussing the particular histories each Asian immigrant group has in the country.

recreating "another nation in the country" and they are ascribed a superior social position because of their association with the First World. The Japanese in Buenos Aires are also viewed as superior because they do not make themselves visible the way Koreans do and the perception of Japanese "willingness" to be incorporated has cemented their position as tolerated "outsiders" in the capital because they do not try to change it.

Latin Asian American Excess

This chapter highlights the history and political context leading up to the enactment of Decree 2073 which established the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program. It also recounts the program's main failures and the labor conflicts that ensued soon after Lao relocation to the provinces. These labor conflicts were precursors to the Buenos Aires protests and evictions of 1980-1982 mentioned in the previous chapter. Looking at the origins of the program brings attention to the intersections of race and class in the ratification of Decree 2073. I historicize the racialization of Lao refugee-workers as maladapted by focusing on the way the program racialized labor from its inception and by analyzing the intersections between militarized humanitarianism, refugee resettlement, and racialized labor, I challenge the idea that the host/refugee dichotomy offers the best entryway to understanding social antagonisms in the context of refugee resettlement. In other words, using archival material I demonstrate that Decree 2073 was an unofficial immigrant labor recruitment effort aimed at supplying small agricultural enterprises located in underpopulated provinces throughout Argentina with *refugee-workers*. Thinking in terms of refugee-workers politicizes the refugee labor actions and work-site abandonment that occurred shortly after refugee relocation to the provinces and points to the state's failure to provide appropriate conditions for Lao resettlement. When Lao refugees denounced their working conditions the dictatorship shrugged off their grievances as cultural incompatibility. The reference to refugee "maladaptation"—an epithet also leveraged against dictatorship critics and leftists at the

time—obviates the responsibility of policy makers, state institutions, and charities in producing the conditions families encountered upon arrival. This chapter emphasizes the economic and ideological considerations at play in the enactment of Decree 2073.

In the previous chapter, *Writing Latin Asian America*, I delineated Argentine forms of Asian racialization and concluded that excess is an important characteristic of Asian immigrants' symbolic position in the dominant Argentine nation building myth. Particularly, Argentine forms of Asian racialization are characterized by the omission and externalization of Asians from contemporary Argentine society which emphasizes racial homogeneity and racial amalgamation scripts. Racial and ethnic amalgamation refers to sameness as a common presumption in Argentina. This has not been achieved by institutionalizing *mestizaje* myths (like the rest of Latin America), or by creating architectures of *de jure* exclusion. Instead, the racialization of Asians in Argentina has historically relied on Eurocentric forms of ethnic terror that uphold the fiction of a racially homogeneous nation. Ethnic terror produces excess by omitting and positioning racial difference at the limits of Argentineness, and in this arrangement, the capital city of Buenos Aires functions as the categorical model for the rest of the country. Since Asian immigrant and refugee externalization is excessive and invisible in the national imaginary its excess is usually captured in the *colectividades* (collectivities) framework often used to name demographic diversity and to make Asian immigrants and refugees in Argentine society legible.

This chapter politicizes and provides historical context for the racialization process that leads to Latin Asian American excess by analyzing the political economic contours of militarized humanitarianism. Argentine Asian immigrant regimes informed

the implementation of Decree 2073 and this chapter articulates the geopolitical and domestic interests fulfilled by the program during the dictatorship.

Decree 2073 and Asian Immigrant Labor

Hemispheric Asian American Studies research relies on relationality to study racialization throughout the America and I write about Asian Argentina in relation to trends in Asian North America by following the connective thread of dispossessive neoliberal capitalism present hemispherically. Economic uncertainty and the growing precarization of life makes the bifurcated and dichotomous character of Asian population movements in the Americas more visible. The concepts of bifurcation and dichotomy are useful for thinking about the ways in which various Asian immigrations to Argentina display forms of what Iyko Day terms “postmodern coolie labor.” Day notes that neoliberalism creates both the figure of the “retro” coolie and the “high-tech” coolie through its dispossessive character.⁷⁷ These forms of postmodern coolie labor are visible in Argentine representations of Lao refugees as excessive and maladaptive, i.e. retro coolie. The racialization of Lao refugees as maladapted refugees has historically occluded their precariousness and those responsible for it. Economic precariousness and neoliberal uncertainty is an important element in Lao experiences of inclusion into Argentina and all of my interlocutors discussed difficulty in finding appropriately remunerated work in Argentina. Furthermore, the question of finding work at all was ever present in my conversations with refugees and their observations are the entry point for my discussion here.

77 Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 174.

Alongside the focus on the work-related difficulties encountered early on by refugees, Lao refugee resettlement needs to be contextualized within the emergence of a novel racial project under the military dictatorship. This racial project is grounded on an approach to modernization that looks to forge closer ties with Asia. Through a series of diplomatic visits and decisions, which include the Southeast Asian Resettlement program, the dictatorship established a foundation for future recruitment of Asian immigrant labor and capital from China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Argentina's burgeoning economic relationship with China during the dictatorship warrants special mention as this relationship became more relevant in the last 40 years. China is currently an important trade partner throughout the region and is the second destination for Argentine exports after Brazil.⁷⁸ In other words, Decree 2073 is anchored in historical Argentine Asian immigration regimes that follow two distinct logics: a capital maximizing logic and a labor maximizing one and the excessive character of Lao refugee racialization has to be reckoned with in light of this important political and economic development in the last half of the 20th century.

As mentioned, Argentine Asian immigration regimes are two pronged and follow a capital maximizing logic and a labor maximizing logic. In exploring Decree 2073 I only highlight the labor maximizing logic as it was the main thrust behind the program. The dictatorship's turn to Asia during the Cold War signaled an important break from Argentina's 19th century approach to immigration which historically relied on European immigrant populations to "civilize" and populate the nation. This older model for courting immigrants ceased to have the same importance in the 20th century and the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement program is a good example of this shift. From its

⁷⁸ China also provides Argentina with most imported goods.

inception the program blended humanitarian concerns with labor concerns. In an 1979 interview with *La Prensa* newspaper celebrating the arrival of the first contingent of Lao refugees, Colonel Remigio Azcona, the Director of the National Migration Administration during the junta, explained that Argentine employers could expect healthy, young couples with small children who, “did not present problems of the ideological kind to Argentina.”⁷⁹ In the same article, Interior Minister General Albano Harguindeguy elaborated:

[T]he process initiated today with this group of Southeast Asian refugees should convey to other nations that the Argentine people live in peace, that there is land in need of laboring hands, that there is a not yet fully exploited potential in this country and, with adequate policies and migrations, this potential can make Argentina grow.⁸⁰

Harguindeguy explicitly referenced the low population rate of Argentine southern and northwestern provinces, highlighted the need for laboring hands, and alluded to Lao refugees’ ideological value by emphasizing that Argentines lived in peace. Furthermore, the dictatorship’s decision to transport Lao refugee-workers to rural and periurban regions throughout Argentina followed earlier attempts to develop these same places economically; hence Decree 2073’s emphasis on populating periurban and rural locations with refugee-workers. It is worth noting that earlier experiences with Japanese

79 “Selecciono a gente joven con 2 a 4 niños, de buena salud y que no presentaran problemas de tipo ideológico para la Argentina,” Author’s translation. *La Prensa*, September 15, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

80 “El proceso iniciado hoy con este grupo de refugiados del sudeste asiático, debe transmitir a otros pueblos la idea de que aquí en la Argentina hay un pueblo que vive en paz; hay una tierra que necesita brazos que la trabajen; hay un potencial que no está totalmente explotado y que, con una política adecuada puede hacerse crecer a la Argentina, con contingentes migratorios de consideración,” *Ibid.*

agricultural laborers in the 50s were an important precursor and informed the Ministry of the Interior's decision to resettle Lao refugees in the provinces. Japanese agricultural colonies consolidated midcentury in the province of Buenos Aires outside the federal capital during Juan Domingo Peron's implementation of the Second Five Year Plan.⁸¹ Argentina's UN representative, Carlos Pastor, assured the UN that the previous migrations of Japanese families played a role in Argentina's decision to give asylum to Lao refugees, citing the "tradition of peace, work, and harmony that characterized the resettlement of many Japanese families" as an influencing factor in Argentina's acceptance of Lao refugees.⁸² Such experiences served as a guide post in the junta's approach to Decree 2073 and speaks to the relationality of Asian racialization in Argentina.

"A new progressive and stable image throughout the world"

The Geopolitics of Humanitarianism

Decree 2073 was signed in a Cold War moment when both the Argentine military dictatorship and the US were changing their approach to international relations. In this section, I lay out the complex geopolitical context underlying the enactment of Decree 2073. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, in the mid-1970s the Argentine military junta confronted serious obstacles in securing funding for its neoliberal economic transformations and the completion of the Yacretá Dam in Misiones, *la Obra del Siglo* (the Work of the Century). The Jimmy Carter administration had signed the Humphrey-

81 Celeste De Marco, "Colonización agrícola japonesa en Argentina. Estudio de dos casos en la provincia de Buenos Aires (1950-1960)," *Migraciones Internacionales* 8, 4 (2016): 141.

82 *La Nación*, July 22, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

Kennedy amendment (1977) thereby imposing an arms embargo on countries suspected of human rights violations. The list included Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay—all military dictatorships and participants in Operation Condor. Most significantly, Carter's human rights agenda impacted Argentina's international credit line and access to loans from the Export-Import Bank (EXIM) and the World Bank. If the junta wanted to regain financing opportunities to finish construction of its Work of the Century, it had to do something about the bad press abroad.

A year prior to Argentina's ratification of Decree 2073, the CIA published a President's Daily Brief titled "Argentina: New Foreign Policy Directions." The briefing detailed the negative financial impacts of the Humphrey-Kennedy act on Argentina and the top secret document explained that the US needed to move beyond its diplomatic impasse with the dictatorship to prevent Argentina from seeking financing for dam turbines from the USSR. The brief closed with a warning, "Argentine willingness to turn to the Communists on economic grounds is likely to increase if the US Congress denies supplier credits through the Export- Import Bank of approximately \$800 million for US exports to Argentina."⁸³ The EXIM bank eventually reversed its negative decision and lent Argentina the money for Yacyretá's turbines in exchange for the Argentine government's concrete steps at improving their public relations image internationally. Three months after the CIA briefing was disclosed, the junta hired a US based public relations firm, Burson-Marsteller to help with crafting a more positive image abroad:

83 Central Intelligence Agency, President's Daily Brief, "Argentina: New Foreign Policy Directions," Top Secret, July 19, 1978, 6-7 <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22392-3-cia-president-s-daily-brief-argentina-new>.

The campaign was spelled out in a proposal to the junta by Burson-Marsteller, a New York public relations agency it now employs. Rather than implementing and publicizing human rights improvements, the agency proposed in a mid-1977 memo, Argentina should “project a new progressive and stable image throughout the world.” The campaign was targeted at three main audiences: “those who influence thinking, which includes the press, government functionaries and educators...those who influence investments...and those who influence travel which includes travel agents, travel writers, airline personnel and tour operators.”⁸⁴

Evidently, the junta’s decision to accept 293 Lao families responded to domestic and international pressures and was not simply an adherence to Washington’s official Cold War position. Without this insight, it would be tempting to reduce Argentine policy to Empire’s imposition though the record shows that the military junta acted in accordance to its nation-building goals.⁸⁵

Along with enacting Decree 2073 to improve its image at home and abroad, the junta also allowed the Organization of American States (OAS) Human Rights Commission to enter Argentina in September 1979 and undertake an investigation of

84 Karen DeYoung and Charles A. Krause, “Our Mixed Signals on Human Rights in Argentina,” *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1978, C1-C2.

85 As an interesting anecdote, President Jorge Rafael Videla visited Japan in October 1979 and articulated his geopolitical vision in a foreboding manner. In his meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister, Videla described Argentina as a country interested in playing the role of mediator in settling the disputes between industrialized and developing countries and noted that the world was undergoing a shift from a bipolar order to one where new centers of power would emerge as influential. *La Prensa*, October 10, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

human rights violations in the country. This was timed to occur the same month that the first contingent of Lao refugees arrived. Once the junta's participation in global refugee resettlement efforts was underway, and once the government admitted the OAS, the EXIM bank and the IMF proceeded with business as usual and Argentina secured funding for Yacyretá's turbines necessary for the completion of the Yacyretá Dam in Misiones.

The Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement program (1979-1980) makes the contradictions of humanitarian intervention by a military dictatorship evident and illuminates common resettlement challenges. By resettling non-European refugees, Argentina was able to claim modern nationhood in the key of humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention served the two-fold purpose of ideologically and materially reproducing the Argentine nation. The figure of the refugee added ideological value to its anticommunist nationalist project and Lao people's potential as refugee-workers added to their economic value. Hence Argentina's humanitarian intervention occurred as a way for the country to reposition itself in the field of capitalist modern nations and also provided a path for addressing national labor shortages. This is why Decree 2073 reflects a labor maximizing logic primarily and why the Lao refugee's ideological value *and* labor worked towards modern nation-building. At a peak Cold War moment, it sought to detract attention away from the junta's legitimacy crisis.

Two hundred ninety three families of predominantly Lao origin arrived to Argentina in September 1979 following Argentina's agreement to resettle refugees during a United Nations meeting held in Geneva in the summer of 1979. Argentina's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chancellor Carlos Washington Pastor, stated that the country did not

possess the economic means to undertake such enterprise and the UN committed to fund the program. Pastor then designated the Ministry of the Interior as responsible for the program's logistics and jurisprudence. Refugees were culled from the Lumpini, Nong Khai, and Ubon refugee camps in Thailand and people ranged from 20-35 years old. Lao from Savannakhet arrived to the Nong Khai camp and people from southern parts of Laos were dispatched to the Ubon camp. Argentine officials preferred nuclear families with small children because it was presumed that children could readily assimilate to Argentine culture. Once in Argentina, families were dispersed to remote areas with only two or three refugee families per town to avoid an ethnic enclave from forming. The isolation refugees felt was unbearable and many left the towns they were relocated to and returned to Buenos Aires to organize with other families and demand different arrangements. In addition to the isolation of relocation, the program's labor and housing conditions were inconsistent. Private Argentine citizens comprised the bulk of refugee employers and lodgers. The Ministry of the Interior published ads in national newspapers in the months prior to the arrival of the first contingent soliciting employers for the refugees, including a form for potential employers. Private employers did provide housing and work in the agricultural sector to refugees but generally assigned tasks that refugees were unaccustomed to performing. Many private employers also failed to remunerate the work of refugees considering it in-kind payment in exchange for lodging though this was not part of the agreement. The logistics for sorting out lodging were organized by the municipality of each locality that housed refugees. To summarize, the resettlement program failed to live up to the promises Argentine officials made to refugees in Thailand and this was the first of many failures in the resettlement process.

As mentioned, Argentine recruiters in the Lumpini, Nong Khai, and Ubon camps in Thailand were careful to select families according to their ideological and occupational profiles. Refugee families were restructured prior to their arrival in Argentina and officials in the Ministry of Migration determined the ethnic parameters of the program early on by deciding to predominantly resettle Lao instead of Cambodians or Vietnamese. While visiting Thailand, two Ministry of Migration officials were accompanied by a journalist and by the Director of the Argentine Rural Society, Pedro de Ocampo, who traveled with the Argentine delegation to personally oversee refugee selection from Thai refugee camps.⁸⁶ Knowing that young, nuclear families with small children were preferred, many Hmong families in the Lumpini Refugee Camp, for example, decided against resettlement in Argentina fearing their extended families would be irreversibly split.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Lao people were preferred due to the racialized perception that they displayed “aptitude” for performing agricultural work.⁸⁸ General Albano Eduardo Harguindeguy, head of the Ministry of the Interior, believed Vietnamese refugees were overqualified to perform the labor duties awaiting them in Argentina. According to Harguindeguy, Lao people were “agriculturally inclined” and hence well suited to fulfill the demands of the Argentine labor sector.⁸⁹

The geopolitical conditions of the time inevitably gave resettlement a strong ideological tinge and refugee resettlement would send a clear message to Argentines:

86 The Argentine Rural Society (ARS) is a civil society organization comprised of Argentina’s historically richest and largest landowning families. Founded in 1866, it was fundamental in funding the Campaña del Desierto, the desert campaign, which displaced, dispossessed, and murdered indigenous populations throughout the Patagonia region in 1889. The ARS continues to play an influential role in Argentine politics and it is significant that they accompanied the official delegation to Thailand.

87 *La Nación*, September 12, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

88 *La Nación*, September 11, 1979 Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires..

89 *La Prensa*, September 2, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

adherence to socialist principles leads to victims at home and abroad. Lao refugees were living examples of communism's victimization in the Third World and Argentina's internal "subversive problem" was alluded to in the ads portraying refugees as victimized and needing rescue from communism. This construction of the Lao in Argentina resembles the ways in which Southeast Asian resettlement in the United States helped justify the US's military defeat in Vietnam. Yen Le Espiritu posits the US "rescue" of Vietnamese refugees as an important tactic that served to undermine the ongoing domestic struggles of non-white racialized groups by showcasing the US state's benevolence toward refugees.⁹⁰ Similarly, the presence of Lao refugees helped construct a moral Argentine citizenry outside of leftist politics. The Left's political project was foreclosed as a legitimate alternative and was targeted as a foreign influence which would destabilize the nation. The Southeast Asian refugee resettlement program thus positioned Lao refugees as examples of *what could be* if the junta did not confront the communist threat at home. In the case of Argentina, the refugee resettlement program consolidated Argentina's entry into modern nationhood and elevated the nation-state to the status of global player.

Decree 2073 resembles earlier colonial schemes of Asian immigrant labor recruitment in the Americas but is postmodern in that it coexists with capital maximizing logics in Asian immigration policies and also helped Argentina reach modern statehood. Historically, Asian immigration in Latin America has primarily been defined through the exploitation of Asian labor but this program points to the ideological value of refugee resettlement during the Cold War. The labor unrest following Lao relocations in

90 Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1: 1-2 (February/August 2006).

Argentine provinces explains why the Argentine Southeast Asian resettlement program ultimately failed to provide Lao refugees with a stable environment. The importance of thinking through the failure of the program is that it raises questions about what constitutes humanitarianism, and also questions what it means to have a successful refugee resettlement program. It also opens the possibility for concerted conversations about the global diaspora of Southeast Asian resettlement beyond the United States and Europe, since the displacement of Lao refugees to Argentina follows a different historical trajectory of Asian migrations to South America. By using the humanitarian gesture to demonstrate that military rule could also be humane and in line with democracy, the military dictatorship exploited the decree's ideological value in addition to its economic one. For this reason, the Argentine junta's decision to resettle refugees reflects the labor maximizing logic that has accompanied Asian immigration to the Americas historically.⁹¹ Yen Le Espiritu argues that refugee representations overwhelmingly rely on the image of a victimized, desperate, pathetic refugee at the expense of situating "refugee flight within its global political-economic and cultural context."⁹² Argentina's gesture followed in the footsteps of countries like Israel and the Philippines, who also participated in the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War, shifting the geographies

91 These works situate Asian immigrations within a context of colonial population flows and have informed my hemispheric approach to Asian American Studies: Sucheng Chang, *Remapping Asian American History* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003).; Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2015).; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998).; Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

92 Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1: 1-2 (February/August 2006): 411, 423.

of the Southeast Asian diaspora away from Europe and the US.⁹³ In her analyses of Latin American literary orientalism, Verónica Junyoung Kim has argued that, “Latin American elites have looked to the West as the model for their national projects. . .[A]s the Orient, Asia is often viewed as barbaric and the premodern in opposition to the West that represents the civilized and the modern”.⁹⁴ I extend Kim’s argument to the junta’s partaking of refugee resettlement whereby the humanitarian act of accepting refugees became a modality that mid-range nations engaged in in an effort to solidify themselves as modern nations along with securing the immigrant labor necessary to modernize economically.

Militarized Humanitarianism

Decree 2073 heeded national concerns along with a broad call made by the UNHCR on December 1978 to address the Southeast Asian humanitarian crisis in nations of first asylum. By the late ‘70s, Malaysia and Thailand threatened to push refugees back to neighboring Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam if the international community did not do more to halt the influx of refugees to their borders. Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the UN, appealed to countries in Latin America in Geneva in the summer of 1979 and invoked Latin America’s hospitality in times of crisis. Chancellor Carlos Washington

93 For work exploring resettlement in Israel and the Philippines see Evyn Espiritu, “Violence of Inclusion amidst a Discourse of Rescue: Situating Vaan Nguyen and the Vietnamese Diaspora in Israel.” Paper presented at the Southeast Asians in the Disapora Conference, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Minnesota, October 2-3, 2014.; James Pangilinan “Pastoral Hospitality: Channels of Collaboration and Care for Vietnamese in the Philippines.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian American Studies, Hilton Orrington, Evanston, Illinois, April 22-25, 2015.

94 Verónica Junyoung Kim, “Centering Panama in Global Modernity: The Search for National Identity and the Imagining of the Orient in Rogelio Sinan’s “Sin novedad en Shanghai,”” *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* 37: 2 (June 2013): 72.

Pastor, the Argentine Minister of External Affairs, announced that Argentina agreed to resettle the Southeast Asian refugees and cited specifics:

Responding to his [Waldheim] call and following the traditional Argentine humanitarian vocation—deeply sensitive to the problem of refugees and displaced people in the world, regardless of their nationality, origin, race or creed—the Argentine government wants to manifest its disposition to receive a total of 1,000 Indochinese refugee families for their resettlement in the adequate regions of my country. It has been preferred to make this offer to families with the goal of not hurting nor affecting family cohesion, and in this way, facilitating their integration. The number of families accepted corresponds to 4 or 5,000 people...⁹⁵

Along with Argentina's acceptance, the UNHCR, the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, and the International Red Cross Committee pledged to provide assistance in the resettlement. US Vice President Walter Mondale proposed to establish a 200-million-dollar fund to finance resettlement in countries outside of Europe and the US. At the time of the meeting, the US committed to accept 168 refugees, while Canada committed to resettle fifty thousand.⁹⁶ Two weeks prior to the arrival of the refugee families, Interior Minister General Albano Harguindeguy commented to a reporter of *La Prensa* that Argentina was in line with Canada, France, and the US in accepting refugees as a means to sway public opinion and make people aware that this

95 *La Prensa*, July 22, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

96 *La Prensa*, July 22, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

was in line with the American and European approach.⁹⁷ Argentines could now distinguish themselves from the rest of the continent through the resettlement.

Harguindeguy would go on to give accolades to the national press for their coverage of the story, “After expressing his recognition of the media’s collaboration with the ministries regarding the broadcasting of information related to the government’s decision to accommodate the refugee families, he [Harguindeguy] exalted the significance of this official measure.”⁹⁸ Harguindeguy’s comments underscore the vital role newspapers played in promoting the idea that resettlement benefited Argentina. The media eased the anxieties of Argentines by informing them that Lao refugees would propel Argentina’s developmental ambitions by gladly becoming agricultural workers. Hence, Lao refugees would not threaten urban labor. The media helped abate fears of “unproductive” immigration, and the distinction between immigrant and refugee, although legally clear, proved less stable in the junta’s discourse and practice. In the print media, refugees were referred to as immigrants and refugees interchangeably.

This referencing of refugees as immigrants led to discussions about who should be allowed into the country in general. In particular Jorge Haroldo McGaul expressed reticence about the program. McGaul, a civil servant of the subsecretary in charge of Border Provinces, recommended to the military junta that Argentina’s border regions should prioritize the immigration of Argentines (from urban areas), Europeans, and lastly Asians.⁹⁹ Otherwise, warned McGaul, these areas would be “overrun” with Chinese restaurants. This reference to Chinese immigrants indexed public conversations about the immigration and presence of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean immigrants in the country.

97 *La Prensa*, September 2, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

98 *Ibid.*

99 *La Prensa*, September 22, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

For instance, in 1979, Kojiro Mori, Okinawa's Director of Migrations, joined the Director of the Argentine Okinawan Center, Hidemitsu Oshiro, to plan for the labor migration of 150 Japanese families to farms in Valle del Rio Colorado.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in 1980, ethnic Chinese immigrants from Taiwan planned to join a Taiwanese colony in Laguna Blanca where Chinese immigrant workers harvested tomatoes and vegetables. The new arrivals would harvest shrimp in Argentina's province of Formosa.¹⁰¹ In 1982, the Korean agricultural colony of "Semaui," New Town, in Isca Yacu was disbanded and Korean laborers moved to the city in search of jobs after working the fields for five years.¹⁰² Undoubtedly, a lot of these Asian immigrations were drowned in the political noise that the dictatorship's repressive measures created but they nevertheless point us to a moment of change that needs to be seen as a general shift toward Argentina's relationship with Asia. The resettlement of Lao refugees was part of these other Asian immigrant labor recruitment efforts albeit the only one shrouded in humanitarianism.

September 14, 1979

On September 4, 1979, National Immigrant Day was celebrated for the first time in Argentina in the province of Rio Negro by inaugurating a refugee reception center anticipating the arrival of the first contingent of Lao refugees.¹⁰³ General Albano Eduardo Harguindeguy, head of the Ministry of the Interior, was present at the festivities and celebrated it would be the first Immigrant Reception and Training Center in Argentina,

100 *La Prensa*, August 18, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

101 *La Nación*, October 2, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

102 *La Prensa*, February 2, 1982. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

103 *La Prensa*, August 3, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

and the world.¹⁰⁴ The pilot center located in the city of Viedma, Rio Negro was replicated throughout Argentine provinces and played an important role in relocating families all over the country.¹⁰⁵ The relative short-lived nature of the program makes locating important processing centers difficult and many refugees have forgotten the names of the centers that processed them. The archive was useful in locating these sites which, at the time, were heralded as visionary and have now been effectively erased from public memory.

On Saturday September 15, 1979, *La Prensa* featured a story headlined, “The First Group of Southeast Asians Has Arrived.”¹⁰⁶ In one of the featured pictures an Argentine journalist jots down statements from two Southeast Asian men. Du Xuong Hung, 33, wears thick-rimmed glasses and stares directly into the camera holding a card in both hands, most likely an UN-issued provisional identification document. Beside him, Phan Van Loi, 30, gazes in a different direction. The celebratory article reported the arrival of twenty families, a total of 105 people, who landed in the Ezeiza Airport of Buenos Aires. Every week thereafter, 150 to 180 refugees were expected to arrive to Ezeiza. Refugees would remain in Ezeiza for approximately two weeks and would then be transferred to various locations throughout Argentina where they would find a job and lodging.¹⁰⁷

Fifty-six refugees from the first contingent were Lao and came from refugee camps in Thailand. Thirty others arrived from Hong Kong and were accompanied by an

104 *La Nación*, August 26, 1979 and *La Prensa*, September 2, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

105 *Ibid.*

106 *La Prensa*, September 15, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

107 *La Prensa*, September 13, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

interpreter who spoke Lao and two other dialects.¹⁰⁸ In Bangkok, the refugees received “appropriate clothing” before boarding the plane. The track jacket worn by Loi, along with the provisional ID cards, was one of the first items received by the refugees prior to their arrival.¹⁰⁹ The group accompanying Hung and Loi was comprised of children, women, and men all under 35 years old, and belonged to the larger group of 1,000 refugee families expected to arrive to Argentina throughout fall and winter of 1979. In their interviews Du Xuong Hung and Phan Van Loi expressed happiness upon their arrival to Argentina. Hung had previously worked as a traffic control agent and Loi had been a policeman. In the coming weeks, both would reside 100 kilometers away from Buenos Aires and would find agricultural work awaiting them.

According to the newspaper article, Hung left Southeast Asia because of its political instability and decades of war between North and South Vietnam, the incursion of the United States into the conflict, and the US bombing raids on neighboring Laos. The article noted that some refugees communicated in English and already tried to speak Spanish. Hung is quoted, “We didn’t have freedom. The government is not of the people, by the people, and for the people. One cannot think what one needs to think, nor know what one needs to know.”¹¹⁰ He added that Argentina is “wonderful” because it resettled refugees and continued, “We all came with the idea of staying forever. . . .Argentina is a rich and new country where I am sure I will be happy.”¹¹¹ Loi, on the other hand, preferred not to discuss the past only referring to it as “a group of shadows,” and focused

108 *Ibid.*

109 *La Nación*, August 26, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

110 *La Prensa*, September 15, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

111 *Ibid.*

instead on how happy he felt that his seven children had arrived safely to Argentina,¹¹² He did tell the press that agricultural tasks were his specialty, although he had been a policeman in a different time.

The article in *La Prensa* explained that a sports training facility once used to prepare national athletes would temporarily house refugee families. The sports training center had capacity for 180 people and was known as the *Centro de Recepción en Ezeiza* (Reception Center in Ezeiza). Refugees were given Spanish lessons and “cultural instruction” about the Argentine way of life at Ezeiza. The Reception Center was the main processing center for refugees who would later be relocated to rural parts of the country. Along with the images of Hung and Loi, the article celebrating the first contingent’s arrival published a picture of a group of Southeast Asian mothers and their children being led by teachers and policewomen.

The respite and hope projected by the first images of refugee arrival was short lived. As early as June 1980, *La Prensa* announced that the refugee resettlement program had been suspended. On June 13, 1980, nine months after the arrival of Hung and Loi, the UN Director of the Program of Indochinese Refugees, Roberto Rodriguez, was quoted, “the majority of Southeast Asians that arrived to Argentina are not specialized in a determined task. Due to the war they endured, they changed profession various times.” Rodriguez continued, “the majority of them (refugees) dedicated themselves to commercial activity in their place of origin, a fact that they (refugees) hid with the purpose of coming to Argentina, where it had been clearly expressed that agrarian workers were preferred.”¹¹³ In Rodriguez’s statement, the refugees were responsible for

112 *Ibid.*

113 *La Prensa*, June 13, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

misleading the UN about their occupations, hence responsible for the program's suspension. Rodriguez's statement echoed other complaints printed in the Argentine press in the summer of 1980 that blamed refugees for their perceived unwillingness to adapt to their new home and a general disinterest in work. Lao refugees were portrayed as dishonest for deceiving UN recruiters in Thai refugee camps about their occupational skills. On June 17, 1980, *Clarín* published the article "Refugee Complaints" announcing that the expected 1,000 families—totaling 5,000 people—would not arrive. Nine months after the aspirant images of Hung and Loi, only 293 Southeast Asian families arrived in Argentina.¹¹⁴

Indeed, many Lao refugees said they worked in agriculture despite being urbanite and Argentine officials, however, failed to deliver the 360 dollars per month promised to each refugee family.¹¹⁵ Refugee families were also told they would have access to water, food, electricity, and medical care for three years upon arrival and there was no social infrastructure outside of the refugee processing centers to ensure this. This situation led Lao refugees to demand improved living conditions and repatriation in some cases.¹¹⁶ In response, the media circulated the label *inadaptado*, maladapted, and said cultural difference was at fault.¹¹⁷

As the program was officially ended, Lao refugees continued to reaffirm their refugee status to stave off insinuations that they were in Argentina voluntarily. In one instance, Lao refugees invoked their humanity to garner support from Argentine society. *Clarín* quoted Lao refugees in Rosario declaring that, "we want to be paid enough to have

114 *Clarín*, June 17, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

115 *Clarín*, August 6, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

116 *Clarín*, April 30, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

117 *La Prensa*, January 27, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

a home and everything else needed to live humanely when we work.”¹¹⁸ In another instance, a bar brawl broke out in Posadas between Lao refugees and Argentines because Argentines did not want to sell alcohol to Lao refugees, giving a sense to the types of daily discrimination refugees endured.¹¹⁹ The Ministry of the Interior singled out Lao refugees in Posadas, specifically, because families in Posadas were accused of having an “attitude of resistance” towards the local authorities.¹²⁰

By 1980 the media reported constant conflicts with refugees and signaled a clear change of tone from earlier celebratory accounts. Lao refugees first escaped their relocation employers and traveled to the Buenos Aires-based UNHCR to demand resettlement to the US, Canada, and France. Their grievances were similar: stolen wages, inadequate housing conditions, isolation and separation from other Lao refugees, and employer abuse. Employers, on the other hand, complained about the refugees’ inability to speak Spanish, their unfamiliarity with agricultural tasks, lack of experience in cold environments and arid regions, laziness, and cultural differences. In one case from Bahia Blanca, employers who hired Lao refugees to work in a soda factory said that Lao refugees sabotaged and halted production three times by tampering with the beverage mixture produced in the factory.¹²¹ On the other hand, Lao refugees workers at the soda factory denounced their differential treatment and unpaid wages. All together, these incidents led to the following summary written in 1981 by Susana Cannella under the General Administration of Demography:

118 *Clarín*, February 1, 1982. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

119 *La Nación*, June 25, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

120 *La Nación*, June 29, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

121 *Clarín*, September 24, 1980. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

Conjuntamente con los factores ya señalados debe tenerse en cuenta que la imagen de los refugiados se había deteriorado considerablemente, conformándose una expectativa de personas conflictivas y sin disposición para el trabajo. De hecho, los sucesivos cambios de asentamiento coadyuvaron a que se firjara (sic.) dicha imagen. En cada cambio laboral la disposición del refugiado decrecía, y era cada vez más bajo el umbral de tolerancia a las dificultades propias de la adaptación a un empleo.

In conjunction with the highlighted factors, it must be kept in mind that the refugees' public image had deteriorated considerably. The expectation was that they were conflictive people lacking the disposition to work. In fact, their constant uprooting helped cement this image. With each job change, the refugees' disposition decreased and their tolerance threshold became lessened when facing the challenges that are part and parcel of adapting to a job.¹²²

These conflicts were also often reduced to a host/refugee binary when they occurred and use culture as the explanatory factor for why the program had not yielded

¹²² Susana Cannella, "Programa de Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático. Analisis y evaluación, período 1979-1981." *Dirección General de Política Demográfica*, 12.

the anticipated results. It is tempting to overemphasize cultural difference, yet this chapter shows that Decree 2073 conceived of the refugee in relation to its worker potential and followed a labor maximizing logic in Argentina's approach to Asian immigration. The refugee-worker concept I propose at the opening of this chapter visibilizes the labor-specific issues that emerged after refugee relocation to the provinces and introduces the category of class to think about its entanglement with the racialization of Lao refugees in the broader Asian Argentine racial project. These labor conflicts were the basis for their racialization as maladapted and established an important precedent for future Lao refugee organizing in Posadas, primarily by sending the most combative cohort of families to Misiones.

The Autonomy of Refugee Resettlement

I close this chapter by thinking about refugee autonomy and the spontaneous character of refugee organizing in the face of the institutional failures visible in the implementation of the Argentine Southeast Asian Refugee Program. I look to the spontaneous character of refugee organizing because it points us to the aleatory and disobedient elements of migration and population movements. It is the neoliberalism from below I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, specifically the importance of anchoring refugee actions in what Veronica Gago termed the *vitalist pragmatic*—the premise that human action is also a manifestation of desire, not reducible nor bound to economic rational choice. Refugees act as subjects with rights and practice a form of citizenship that exceeds their legal status. When motivated by finding adequate living conditions, refugees refuse the terms of their resettlement and engage in active city-

making. Lao city-making led a significant group of refugees to establish roots in Posadas through negotiations with various stake holders which gave way to the emergence of a Southeast Asian Argentina in Misiones.

Acknowledgement

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“I always go where there is work”

Thao (64) invited me to his home in the neighborhood of San Isidro one morning. He had just returned to Posadas in 2017 from a 13-year sojourn in Philadelphia where he worked as an asbestos remover. Originally from Khongsedone, Thao arrived with his wife and three children in 1979 to the Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires and was then sent to the province of Rio Negro. After picking apples for 9 months in Rio Negro, Thao returned to Buenos Aires with his family and worked for the state-owned railway company *Ferrocarriles Argentinos*, Argentine Railways.¹²³ Sometime in the 1980s a fellow paisano¹²⁴ named Somkhith shared with Thao that there was land available for refugees in the much warmer northeastern province of Misiones. Thao then moved to Posadas in 1985 to a settlement known as Colonia Laosiana.

Somkhith had negotiated with the UNHCR in Buenos Aires to obtain a 20-hectare land plot in what was then the city outskirts. Though I never met Somkhith—he had long since returned to Laos where he lived in a “large and beautiful mansion” according to many of his paisanos—Somkhith’s name came up frequently among my interlocutors in Posadas. He was a peculiar figure and had led the efforts to establish the Colonia Laosiana in the 1980s. He also initiated a work-visa arrangement in the 2000s that linked Posadas to Philadelphia; he would arrange for his paisanos to travel to the US with

123 Employment with a state-run company or a local municipality were avenues through which some refugee families gained employment after leaving agricultural work. The state-owned Argentine Railways was one of the few public companies that offered Lao refugees work. In the case of Posadas, however, these employment opportunities along with opportunities with the municipality were rare.

124 The Spanish word *paisano* refers to a person from the same place/country of origin and it has a friendly connotation. It is a term that my interlocutors used and preferred when talking about other Lao in Argentina and abroad. In Lao usage, the term paisano emphasizes their shared country of origin instead of ethnic or religious differences, and/or regional origin. My usage in the dissertation reflects Lao usage.

temporary work visas and he would provide lodging and food to them in exchange for a monthly fee. Thao's stint in Philadelphia was part of this work-visa program that Somkhith set up. Thao worked alongside others from Posadas as well as paisanos from other provinces. Somkhith's role in securing resources for some families in the Colonia Laosiana period and the channeling of folks to work in Philadelphia was not perceived in good light by all—some of my interlocutors questioned Somkhith's integrity. The tensions around his leadership in the community had to do with perceptions that he had 'self-appointed' himself leader of Lao refugees and personally benefited off this. Numerous interlocutors referred to Somkhith's knowledge of French and English upon arrival as an important factor in his taking an impromptu leadership role. Beyond the differing views around Somkhith's persona, these internal debates and discussions reveal that refugee relocation to Posadas was stratified; families arrived to the city in waves and for different reasons. The community chatter about Somkhith also brought attention to the complexity and richness of the varied city-making practices that Lao refugees have engaged in since their arrival in waves to the posadeño borderlands. To paint a picture of Lao city-making, I historicize these different relocations and link them to the establishment of Lao neighborhoods at different points in time. The origins of the Colonia Laosiana are one piece of a larger housing puzzle in the city.

The negotiations that Somkhith reached around 1982 with the UNHCR would secure land for twenty Lao refugee families along with subsidies to purchase construction materials for people to build single family homes and buy small farm animals, like pigs and chickens. Under the agreement, each family would receive one hectare for planting and growing crops to provide a means of subsistence in the form of small-scale family

farming. After Somkhith finalized an agreement about the Colonia with the UNHCR in Buenos Aires, he recruited families to go to the new settlement in Posadas and Thao was recruited in these efforts. After a couple of years living in the Colonia Laosiana the original 20 families sold, or traded, their plots with other paisanos who have maintained residence there until today. Currently, the Colonia Laosiana is composed of Lao refugees, Lao-Argentine families, a few Argentine families, and Lao Buddhist monks. It has since become nationally recognized and famous for being home to one of the first and largest Buddhist temples in Argentina. In addition to the single-family homes and temple, the settlement also houses a church. Thao recalled his memories about that first cohort of 20 families in the Colonia:

Ahora (es) distinto, ahora se cambio ahi (Colonia), salí mucho. Toda gente nueva entraron ahora. Unos se fueron a vivir a Buenos Aires, Rancho, Chascomús, todos lados viste. Yo me fuí al sur otra vez y después volvemos otra vez, así. Buscando trabajo, para vivir. Yo vendí casa en Colonia, yo vendí para un viejo. Porque yo no estaba y no había nadie para cuidar la casa, entonces hay que vender. Por si las dudas, si no se rompe todo en la casa, hay que vender.

Viste, la Colonia tenía chacra y críaban pollo, chancho, pero (para) comunidad, no para mí solo. Todas las 20 familias. Y trabajaban ahí. Cumplimos tres años de residencia y después dividimos y salimos para todos lados.

Porque cumplís tres años y si a vos no te gusta, vas a otro lado. Así. Si te gusta, te quedas...se vende todo—chancho, pollo, todo, y tractor, camión. Después se dividió la plata.

It's different now, now it (Colonia) has changed (after) many left. All new people in there now. Some (initial residents) moved to Buenos Aires, Rancho, Chascomus, you see, everywhere. I went south again, and then we returned again (to Misiones), like that. Looking for work, to live. I sold the house in the Colonia, I sold it to an older man. I wasn't there and there was no one to care for the house, so it has to be sold. Just in case, if not everything will be ruined (in the house), it has to be sold.

You see, the Colonia had land and (we) raised chickens and pigs, for the community, not only for myself. All 20 families (participated). They worked there. We met the 3 year residency requirement and then we separated and went all over the place. Because once you reach three years, if you don't like (where you are), you go somewhere else. Like that. If you like it, you stay...(we) sold everything; the pigs, chickens, everything, the tractors and buses. Then we divided the money.

Thao's sojourning within Argentina and abroad offer us a small glimpse of the recurring refugee mobility most of my Lao interlocutors experienced once they were

resettled in Argentina; characterized by non-linear paths in search for work and a place to live. In their search for remunerated work, some, like Thao, traveled abroad in the 1990s to work in the US with the help of Somkhith. Others maintained active connections to the province of Buenos Aires, with Korean textile factories located in the neighborhood Flores. The establishment of the Colonia Laosiana (early-1980s) and the emergence of the predominantly Lao neighborhoods of Yohasá (late 1990s) and San Isidro (early 2000s) generated the conditions for long-term settlement in Posadas. When I asked Thao why, despite choosing Posadas as his home base, he moved around so much, he replied matter-of-factly, “*yo siempre voy a donde hay trabajo*” (I always go where there is work.)

The search for steady, remunerated work appeared frequently as a central theme in Lao refugee city-making. The breakdown of state-led efforts to transform the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program into a rural refugee-worker recruitment scheme meant that the Argentine state and the UNHCR gradually stepped away from providing additional support and resources to Lao refugees after they abandoned their initial sites of resettlement beginning in 1980. When Lao families left the rural and isolated areas they were dispatched to after their arrival, they defied Decree 2073's restrictions on movement which stipulated they could not reside within 62 miles of the city of Buenos Aires. Families camped outside the UNHCR offices in Buenos Aires to protest the working and living conditions of their initial sites of relocation within Argentina and the UNHCR then provided some of these families with temporary lodging at hotels in the capital after they declined the refugees' calls for repatriation to Laos, or resettlement to the US.

An 1980 article published in *El Territorio* with the headline, “Laotians who were in Mendoza arrived to Buenos Aires and demand to be taken to the US” reported that at least 13 Lao families camped outside the US Embassy in Buenos Aires in April 1980 demanding to be relocated to the US. Khievong Vanh Vanh was quoted saying that refugee families were “not comfortable” working in Argentina and that they had left their initial sites in Mendoza,

because we are not used to working so much and receiving such little money for our work. Besides, we do not have the freedom to move, we are required to stay in our workplaces, and we cannot do the things we like, or know how to do. Only working the fields, working with saws, cleaning, plowing.^{125 126}

Khievong’s call for resettlement to the US was dismissed with the claim that the Lao in Argentina could no longer claim refugee status. This argument is echoed in the words of Frederick H. Hassett, the Consul General of the US Embassy in 1980 who stated,

there is no legal basis for this ask to be considered
(relocation to the US)...[F]undamentally this group of

125 *El Territorio*, April 29, 1980. Territorio Archives. Posadas.

126 Khievong was referencing the three year temporary residency limitation that Decree 2073 imposed on the refugees. According to the program, refugees had to remain in their sites of resettlement and outside of a 62 mile radius of the city of Buenos Aires. The goal was to locate all families outside of urban centers.

Laotians cannot be considered refugees, they reside in Argentina, the country which admitted them and allowed them to live on its soil.¹²⁷

According to this logic, because they had accepted to travel from Thai refugee camps to Buenos Aires, refugees had ‘forfeited’ their right for relocation elsewhere. After a couple of months in this impasse whereby some families protested in front of the US Embassy and in front of the UNHCR headquarters, the UNHCR stopped subsidizing the hotel stays they had initially paid for while they looked for alternative relocation solutions. While some families opted to protest outside of the institutions responsible for their resettlement in Argentina, other families became increasingly impatient and these groups were then relocated, once more, to the Ezeiza Refugee Reception Center. The Ezeiza center would close shortly after 1980 due to an episode that ensued on its premises, a significant event that led to more waves of refugee relocations to Misiones in 1980. A final report written in 1981-1982 by Susana Cannella of the General Management of Demographic Policy responsible for refugee relocations documented the following:

Con respecto a las familias que quedaron en el Centro de Ezeiza, cabe señalar que el clima allí se fue haciendo cada vez más difícil y hostil. En el mes de julio se produjo un episodio que culminó con la intervención de las fuerzas de seguridad. A raíz del enfrentamiento entre los refugiados y

127 Ibid.

las fuerzas de seguridad los jefes de 13 familias fueron separados y alojados en instalaciones militares del aeropuerto de Ezeiza, donde permanecieron hasta fines del mes de julio, regresando posteriormente al Centro de Recepción.

*Debido a los hechos registrados se decidió cerrar las instalaciones de dicho Centro. **Las familias consideradas como las más conflictivas fueron enviadas a un centro de recepción en la ciudad de Posadas en la provincia de Misiones.***

With respect to the families that stayed in the Ezeiza Reception Center, it must be noted that the climate there became increasingly hostile and difficult. An episode took place in July which culminated in the intervention on behalf of security forces. Due to the confrontation between the refugees and the security forces 13 heads of household had to be separated and lodged in the military facilities located in the Ezeiza airport. They remained there until the end of July and eventually returned to the Reception Center.

Due to the events that took place it was decided that the Center had to close. **The families considered the most conflictive were sent to a reception center in the city of Posadas in the province of Misiones.**¹²⁸ (my emphasis)

One of the last organized efforts to deal with refugee site abandonment and relocation was the UNHCR's decision to bus refugee families to Misiones starting 1981 after the *desalojos* (evictions) of Lao refugees from the hotels previously subsidized by the UNHCR in Buenos Aires and the closing of the Ezeiza Reception Center. The UNHCR's decision to relocate refugee families to the northeastern province of Misiones changed the fate of the Lao refugee community in Argentina and set the stage up for long-term refugee settlement in Posadas.

In tracing the serpentine paths leading to this, I heed hemispheric Asian American scholars' Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen Lopez's call to write histories that account for Asian presence and contributions in Latin America while also looking to the ways that, "Asians complicate narratives about race relations and identity, independence and nation-building, family, and migration."¹²⁹ As the chapter's title indicates, I focus on Lao city-making practices in *Tierra Colorada* (the Red Land)—the affectionate term used by refugees and misioneros alike to refer to Posadas's copper-red soil—and I show that Lao refugee experiences invigorate regional racial formations, space, and place by symbolically connecting the Parana to the Mekong. In this final chapter, I capture the

128 Susana Cannella, "Programa de Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático. Analisis y evaluación, período 1979-1981." *Dirección General de Política Demográfica*, 10.

129 Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen Lopez, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, 1 (2008) 16.

multiple ways that Lao refugees claimed space in this disempowered, peripheral northwestern region in Argentina bordered by Paraguay and Brazil. When refracted through Lao refugee experiences, the centrality of Posadas as the nucleus of Lao Argentine memory and history shines brightly, repositioning itself as a cardinal point in the trajectory of contemporary Latin Asian American history and urbanity.

Lao city-making in Tierra Colorada

Noi (48) was 12-13 years old when he first arrived with his family to Ezeiza. His family was resettled to Cordoba for the initial three years of their resettlement and his dad worked in the corn fields until the residency limitation was lifted. Eventually the family moved to Misiones in 1983 and first settled in El Brete. When I asked Noi why his family had moved to Misiones he replied an answer I would encounter frequently:

*Y porque en Posadas ambiente es similar que en mi país.
Es menos frío, viste, no (como) el sur, Córdoba...aca
menos frío, más calor. En mi país hay mango, hay mamón
(papaya), (aquí) todo es similar a mi país. Y a mi papá le
gustó... Y por eso la mayoría de los laosianos vienen todos
por acá.*

*Los paisanos, los laosianos, los que viven en Argentina se
conocen todos. 'Y a dónde va vos?' Y se escribe la carta y
manda, 'vení, vení, acá hay mango, todo' y mi papá sin*

conocer viene nomás. Y venimos, viste, que no importa si no tenemos casa. Los laosianos siempre se comparte el lugar. Y aunque (haya) una pieza, chiquito, lo mismo, todos juntos. Los laosianos siempre es así, se ayuda. Por eso.

Según lo que nos cuentan muchos, que acá los laosianos argentinos, que se ayudan mucho. Y después, en cambio, laosianos de Norte América, no, porque cada uno tiene que vivir su vida y tiene que buscar el trabajo. Acá es mas unido. También como mi hermano, viste, que se fueron a Norte América los laosianos argentinos, pero siempre estan unidos (allá). Hay trabajo, se ayuda, hay fiesta, todo. Pero solamente los laosianos argentinos. Los laosianos yankis, no, se parece que es otra cosa. Yo no sé, yo no conozco.

Because in Posadas the environment is similar to that of my country. It's less cold, you see, not like the south, (or) Cordoba. (Here) it's less cold, hotter. In my country there's mango, papaya, here everything is similar to my country. And my dad liked that, and that's why the majority of the Laotians come here.

The paisanos, the Laotians, the ones who live in Argentina, (they) all know each other. ‘Where are you going?’ And they write letters and send (them), ‘come, come, there’s mango, everything’ and my father came like that, without knowing (the place). And we came, you see, it doesn’t matter if we don’t have homes. Laotians always share their place. And even if there’s only a small room, it’s the same, we’re all together. Laotians are always like that, we help (each other). That’s why.

According to what many tell us, that the Argentine Laotians here, they help each other a lot. And after, in comparison, the North American Laotians don’t because they each have to live their lives and have to look for work (on their own). It’s more united here. Like my brother, too, you see, they left to North America the Argentine Laotians and they’re always united (over there). There’s work, they help (each other), there’s parties, everything. But only the Argentine Laotians. The Yankee Laotians, no, it’s as if they’re something else. I don’t know, I’ve not been there.

This kindly narrative about Lao refugee resettlement in Misiones has also been echoed in Argentine media. It mostly highlights Misiones’s subtropical weather as one of

main reasons for the community's settlement in Posadas. While Posadas's hot and humid weather was certainly pointed out by my interlocutors as a reason for their settlement in the city, some also mentioned the collective struggles and challenges they faced throughout the years as they sought stable forms of employment and housing. The stereotype of the maladapted and conflictive refugee continued to inform media representations throughout the 1980s, spurred by the widespread reporting about site abandonment and the public disputes refugees had with authorities over their pay and working conditions. By the 1990s, however, this representations softened and Lao presence in Misiones began to be narrativized differently and included into Argentina's broader immigration narratives under the collectivities framework I discussed in Chapter 1.

During my field work these oft-repeated explanations about why Lao refugees settled in Posadas reflect the affection Lao refugees developed for their city. Overemphasizing these overly simplistic reasons risks ignoring the wrinkles that characterized their early years in the province: work-site abandonment, unemployment, police harassment, and discrimination. Admittedly, it is difficult to resist comparing the Parana to the Mekong, or to not draw parallels between the luscious tropical greenery characteristic of Misiones to that of some parts of Laos. The availability and abundance of papaya, ginger, bamboo, mango, herbs like moringa, and access to fishing certainly played an important role in giving Lao refugees a sense of familiarity and acquaintance. Misiones may be "just like home" but the road home was filled with many obstacles. As my interlocutors made clear, life is still full of challenges, and Lao city-making practices are expressions of necessity, community, family, and affect.

The multicultural narrative about Lao arrival to Argentina has been taken to film and literature in the last decades in Argentina. One example is Laura Ortega and Leonel D'Agostino's *Rio Mekong* (2016) a film mixing documentary and fiction to tell the life story of V. Ritchenaporn using the Mekong River as a departure. Similarly, Javier Luccisano's 2016 documentary film *Mekong - Parana*, based on a book titled "*Los dias de sol*" (2009), *Sunny Days*, written by Susana Persello about a family of Lao refugees resettled in the city of Recreo in the province of Santa Fe, are cinematographic explorations of the arrival of Lao refugees to Argentina. Both films, *Mekong - Parana* and the *Rio Mekong*, exemplify a widespread narrative about Lao refugees in Argentina—one that reiterates dramatic scenes of war and escape as foundational to situating Lao people and their descendants in Argentina. As the early representation of Lao refugees as maladapted and conflictive faded, tales of escape from Laos into Thailand became the focus of oft-repeated narratives about Lao refugee arrival to the country. These representations do not identify Lao history in Argentina as part of a broader Asian Argentine history. Luccisano and Persello's most recent accounts crystallize a common trope: the retelling of the initial moment of displacement and escape.

I was once told by a Lao interlocutor who did not want to be interviewed on the record, "[I]t is all out there, there's many newspaper articles written about our story. Just look for it online." I thought about her statement and what it would mean to take the online archive at face value and accept its historicization of Lao settlement in Argentina. I thought about the lapses in the online archive captured in media accounts and recognized it fails on many fronts, primarily by occluding that Lao city-making in tierra

colorada is a multifaceted and collective process that coheres around affect, a common history, solidarity gestures, and conflicts of interest among different groups of Lao. The internal conflicts and differences that emerged among various groups of Lao refugees have more to do with the dynamics of Posadas than with Laos. In the introduction, I discussed Veronica Gago's concept of neoliberalism from below to think about Lao city-making alongside the broader socioeconomic landscape it occupies, which is another way of saying, this work thinks about city-making in relation to Posadas's characteristics as a borderland. Lao refugees repurposed resources in this context in their quest to make a living and the border features of the city made life viable in ways that a city like Buenos Aires could not.

As Noi's statements illustrate, there is a sentiment that the Lao in Argentina share a strong communal sense. There is also a general consensus that one of the reasons why refugees are in Misiones is because of its pleasant weather and easy availability of familiar fruits and vegetables. I came across different versions of this narrative though older community members tended to be more critical. The first generation still acknowledged their fondness for the provinces' subtropical features but the varied perspectives alluded to generational differences in the community. Perhaps this also denotes the shifts in Argentine media's representation of the Lao over the last four decades. The move away from an externalizing, negative representation of Lao refugees has been in favor of a multicultural inclusion into the province's *crisol de razas* narrative.

Social conflict accompanied city-making in Lao refugees' initial years in Posadas and it highlights the complicated process through which Lao refugees claimed their right to the city. In the sections below, I delineate the different locations, waves, and cohorts of

refugees that first began to settle in Posadas. In particular, Wanda and the Expoferia (also known as El Brete) as well as the role of the Misiones Resettlement Plan (1982) were important for channeling more families to the province. The Misiones Resettlement Plan also set the backdrop for the Colonia Laosiana negotiations that took place after 1980 and put in place a pathway that would channel more Lao refugees to Posadas in the years to come.

The Yerbales in Wanda

The first group to arrive to Misiones was a contingent of 15 families sent to the locality of Wanda. Already in the summer of 1979 a group of influential yerba mate growers had written a letter to dictator Jorge Rafael Videla lobbying him to boost the population of the province through Lao refugee resettlement. The letter was penned by the Agrarian and Yerbatero Center, an influential yerba mate lobby from Misiones, and pleaded the national government to raise the admission of refugee families from 1,000 to 5,000.¹³⁰ Although the yerbateros succeeded in courting Lao refugees to Misiones, the number of families they requested did not actually reach their desired numbers, and by 1980, Misiones had petitioned for 185 Lao families. Given the importance of yerba mate as a profitable economic commodity in the province, refugee families were first sent to work in the *yerbales*, yerba mate plantations, located in the city of Wanda before they made their way to the capital city of Posadas. The first contingent sent to Misiones was the group sent to work for the Wanda Agricultural Coop—sixteen refugee families who arrived in February 19, 1980, totaling 70 people; 33 of whom were children. The

130 *Clarín*, July 15, 1979. Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno. Buenos Aires.

agricultural coop had jobs available for the refugees as lumbermen, mechanics, nursery workers, tractor drivers, and general transportation drivers.^{131 132}

Upon arrival to Posadas, the plan was for families to spend one month living in the Expoferia, the provincial Reception Center (or Adaptation Center as it was also known). The Expoferia was located along the Parana riverbank and the idea was for refugees to spend a month there learning Spanish and Argentine cultural customs before moving on to other places. The Expoferia eventually became absorbed by El Brete, the poor riverbank neighborhood located next to the Expoferia, in the absence of a longterm housing solution for refugees. The waves of Lao refugee families who arrived to Posadas after the initial 16 families in Wanda would reside in El Brete primarily, as the Expoferia was also known. The cohorts from Wanda and the Expoferia/El Brete were not the same from Colonia Laosiana. As for the first cohort of 16 families, problems arose with that relocation starting the second month of resettlement. This followed suit in other provinces throughout the country. Refugees, along with their sponsors, began to note irreconcilable conflicts in this first stage of resettlement. Refugee sponsors like Raul Sanchez, a Misiones businessman who petitioned for eight families for his yerba mate plantation and who built homes for the families publicly denounced the director of the Adaptation Center in Posadas, Mayor Alberto Perez, blaming him for a lack of

131 *El Territorio*, January 5, 1980. Territorio Archives. Posadas.

132 The months of February and March of 1980 were accompanied by news of visits to Argentina from Asian government officials. On February 6, 1980, the Posadas based newspaper *El Territorio* published an editorial about Lao resettlement in the province and it began by discussing the visit of South Korean officials to Buenos Aires to discuss the viability of an immigration program in Argentina. At the time, about 1,000 Korean families were living in Argentina already and the editorial called for the government to proceed with caution, lauding Misiones' decision to resettle Lao refugees and cautioning against "unplanned migration." Later in March 31, 1980, *El Territorio* reported on the arrival of Japanese officials to Misiones to investigate the prospects for the mass production of soy in the city of Eldorado.

transparency and communication about the potential challenges of Lao relocation.¹³³ This complaint was echoed by Roberto Beck, whose coop received the other initial eight families. Beck eventually became good friends with Songkram, who was a child at the time, and he gifted him a memoir he penned with his recollections of that time in recognition of the difficulties endured by Lao families. Among the observations Beck made in his writings, the issue of remuneration was once more highlighted.

Cual fué el fracaso de este programa tan bien organizado, puesto que sus deseos de salir de Wanda no se pudieron revertir, a pesar de todas las propuestas que se hicieron, tanto la Cooperativa como los funcionarios de varias instituciones.

Todo nace por las propuestas de las segundas condiciones, por las que vinieron los refugiados a la Argentina, las cuales remarcaban eran 10, pero eran totalmente desconocidas por la Cooperativa, siendo una de ellas las que causó el problema, era la que cobrarían por su trabajo 360 Dólares por mes, pues todas las demás condiciones fueron cumplidas, tanto por el Gobierno como la Cooperativa, pero el sueldo prometido era tres veces mas de lo que cobraban nuestros obreros, por lo tanto imposible pagarles esto.

133 *El Territorio*, March 27, 1980.

What was the failure of this program, so well organized, given that their (refugees) wishes to leave Wanda could not be averted despite the efforts and proposals of the various civil servants and the Cooperativa (Wanda).

Everything boils down to the secondary conditions, the reasons why the refugees came to Argentina, which (they) said were 10, but were completely unknown to the Cooperativa. One of which caused a problem—the condition that claimed they would receive \$360 per month for their work—all other conditions were met by the government and the Cooperativa. The salary that was promised was three times higher than what our workers were paid and, therefore, impossible to pay.¹³⁴

The original 16 families eventually left Wanda for Posadas and stayed in the Expoferia until the 3 year residency requirement was lifted. About 4 of the original 16 families in Wanda moved to the Colonia Laosiana while the rest either stayed in El Brete or moved elsewhere.

Expoferia and El Brete

In addition to establishing a limitation on mobility, Decree 2073 laid out that every refugee receiving province needed a reception center where refugees would receive

¹³⁴ Roberto Beck. Cooperativa Wanda, memoir. Date unknown, 10.

language and Argentine culture lessons before relocation to their work sites. In Posadas, the Expoferia served this purpose and, as mentioned, was located on a riverbank settlement also known as El Brete. My interlocutors remember not being allowed to enter or exit the building at their discretion and curfews were common. They needed permission to exit the Expoferia premises and given the rigidity of these early years, many of my interlocutors mentioned the Expoferia's similarity with the harshness of Thai refugee camps. This was a particularly bad memory of their initial years in El Brete and many people shared this off the record. Multiple men mentioned the disputes and physical altercations with police guarding the Expoferia building when the refugees' attempts to negotiate their mobility failed.

El Brete was in an area scheduled to flood with the filling of the Yacyretá Dam's reservoir to its full capacity. The fate of Lao refugees intersected with the dam once again since their resettlement. As I discuss in detail in the introduction section titled "Forty Years of Lao History in Argentina," the military dictatorship first secured loans to pay for turbines for the Yacyretá Dam's construction by making the strategic decision to resettle refugees. At the time, the Inter-American Bank was hesitant to provide the Argentine Junta with funds due to the increased scrutiny the dictatorship received internationally due to accusations of human rights abuses made by civil society groups against the government. The Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program coincided with a series of public relations acts coordinated by the Junta to counter this perception and obtain financing for the dam whose reservoir would decades later swallow El Brete's shores. The uncanny coincidence of this turn of events is that Lao refugees indirectly helped Argentina secure the loan which financed the completion of the Yacyretá Dam. Once the

Yacyretá Binational Entity (EBY, in its Spanish acronym) began displacing people from El Brete in the 90s, including Lao refugees, a struggle over housing ensued between Lao refugees and the EBY which would lead to the establishment of the neighborhoods of Yohasá and San Isidro in later decades. By 1982, the province of Misiones took a backseat to refugee management and the EBY stepped in as a main interlocutor. This change of policy marked an informal transfer of primary responsibility from the UNHCR to other institutional actors beyond the state that also included the Red Cross in respect to the Catholic Lao refugee population in Posadas.

The families that were sent to live in the Expoferia were the same ones labelled as “the most conflictive” in the report written by Susana Cannella of the General Management of Demographic Policy in 1981. These refugee families insisted on leaving Argentina as late as 1985 and even refused permanent Argentine residency fearing this could hinder their chances for resettlement elsewhere. Palani and Keowyn, two leaders of the Expoferia cohort, told me off the record about an incident that occurred in 1991, which they argue, escalated the conflict with the EBY and eventually led the EBY to prioritize securing housing for the refugees in El Brete. They told me that the military was involved in this brawl and that they threw smoke bombs into their homes in El Brete while children and women were inside. As this violent incident resulted in injuries (broken ribs) on behalf of the refugees, a UNHCR representative from Canada visited Posadas to make a report.¹³⁵ The cohorts that lived in El Brete were more willing to discuss these incidents with me off the record because they said that they were only telling the truth. Folks in the Colonia were not forthcoming about their encounters with police in Posadas and I sensed a concern about their statements being misinterpreted. Overall, my interlocutors

¹³⁵ I looked for this report and was unable to locate it.

emphasized the challenges they encountered over the decades in Posadas but were also adamant that they were now misioneros. I took these statements to reflect a tenuous sense of belonging that reflects the complexity of their relationship to Posadas.

At least three of the families I spoke with that lived in El Brete escaped to Brazil en route to French Guyana in the late 1980s but were deported back to Argentina. Seng recalled that in 1987 he left to Sao Paulo for 14 days with his family with the help of the Red Cross. Seng is Catholic and the Red Cross arranged for him to stay in churches on his way to French Guyana. His family first crossed the Argentine-Brazil border at Puerto Iguazú and then stayed in a Catholic Church in Sao Paulo while he gathered money to pay for the bus to reach Oiapoque, Brazil, “*cuando llego a Oiapoque a la frontera me agarra la policia federal de Brasil*” (When I get to the border at Oiapoque the Brazilian federal police get me). Seng and his family were 300 meters away from French Guyana but were sent back, they did not try to leave again.

El Plan de Reubicación en Misiones, 1982

The Misiones Relocation Plan of 1982 signaled a shift in refugee management that transferred authority from the UNHCR and the Interior Ministry to the General Management of Migration institution with assistance from the Federal Police. This transition occurred in light of the lifting of refugee movement restrictions and it led to Lao refugees deciding to stay in Posadas. The Misiones Relocation Plan, however, was not welcomed by all. The Misiones coordinator in charge of refugee management pre-1982 wanted to move refugee families to other towns in Misiones with the aim of preventing their settlement in Posadas. Until 1982 some families with family members in

Europe were successfully relocated to France until France refused to resettle more refugees. There were approximately 34 families living in Misiones in this period and the Misiones Relocation Plan laid the groundwork for Misiones to become the preferred province to reroute any families that expressed dissatisfaction in other Argentine provinces.

One possible interpretation for the decision to create a pathway to the northeast is that its geographical distance to the capital of Buenos Aires (more than 600 miles away) would stall refugees' return to the capital and stave off the potential of protests at UNHCR headquarters or the US Embassy. Moreover, Misiones's proximity to neighboring countries like Brazil and Paraguay also introduced the possibility for refugees to try their luck elsewhere.

While the easy access to fresh fish, fruits, bamboo helped Lao families subsist, the conditions of Posadas as a border made it possible for many of them to live in extreme precarity, but with a level of self-sufficiency that would have been difficult to achieve in a city like Buenos Aires, for example. Posadas' border condition enables the informal sector. Refugees living in El Brete sold knitted dolls to locals during the summer before the dam's reservoir flooded the neighborhood. Later, many Lao families began to network with Koreans in Buenos Aires who would provide them with clothes to sell in Posadas. Many of the paisanos sold clothes in the late 1980s to make a living, and once they became familiar with the trade and vending routes, they began crossing the border to Paraguay to purchase clothes at cheaper prices to then sell in Misiones. The links with Korean-owned textile manufacturing shops and with Paraguay for the purpose of selling clothes are active to this day. Korean textile-manufacturers rely on Lao familiarity with

Posadas and the neighboring city of Encarnación in Paraguay. Some families earn a living smuggling clothes and other items across the border which are then transported by bus and sold in Buenos Aires. This is common with second-generation Lao living in Buenos Aires who make business with Koreans and involve their older family members in Posadas who participate in coordinating trips to Paraguay. Clothing is significantly cheaper in Paraguay because Paraguay does not impose taxes on foreign imports and this scenario has created opportunities for refugees living in Posadas.

Colonia Laosiana

As discussed in the opening of this chapter, the Colonia Laosiana was an negotiation that benefited 20 families in Posadas led by a refugee named Somkhith. The Colonia Laosiana was a parallel settlement to El Brete and while the land negotiations with the UNHCR were settled around 1982, the construction of homes began until 1984. There are differences of opinion about the establishment of the Colonia though it is undisputed that it has become the most iconic place for paisanos from Argentina to gather for special occasions.

In this section I want to highlight that, interestingly, its establishment needs to also be understood in the context of prior colonization schemes in Argentina which are a precedent for such ethnic-based settlements. In the 1960s President Frondizi signed an agreement with the Japanese government prioritizing immigration to the province of Buenos Aires that was agriculturally-bound.¹³⁶ Furthermore, the history of colonization in

136 Celeste De Marco, "Colonización agrícola japonesa en Argentina. Estudio de dos casos en la provincia de Buenos Aires (1950-1960)," *Migraciones Internacionales* 8, 4 (2016): 146

Misiones also includes ethnic-based settlements, though they mostly consisted of European and Eastern European populations.

In the 1980s Argentina saw the arrival of other Asian immigrations at the time that the Colonia negotiations took place. For instance, in October 1980 Taiwanese immigrant workers arrived to the province of Formosa to cultivate shrimp and develop that industry. Formosa already had Taiwanese agricultural workers in its fields growing tomatoes, and the shrimp project was backed up the investment of 1 million dollars.¹³⁷ Moreover, in 1981, about 100 Japanese families would arrive to Bahia Blanca to perform agricultural work as well.¹³⁸

The EBY and the Struggle over Housing

Between 1998 and 2007 the EBY resettled over 108 Lao refugee families to the neighborhoods of Yohasá (1998) and San Isidro (2007) after a long and protracted fight. The dam building process with the EBY led to Lao refugee emplacement in Posadas because this struggle over housing consolidated Lao refugees' claim to a home in the city. The Lao living in El Brete demanded that the EBY prioritize their community when the flooding of the neighborhood began. This group of Lao successfully emphasized their refugee status to make the case for their need for permanent housing.

The Lao refugee struggle over housing with the EBY had the effect of rooting Lao people in Posadas by strengthening their identification with the city and the province in ways that the earlier programs could not. Organizing as a group against the EBY cemented Lao sense of belonging to a process that was anchored in Argentine history.

137 (*La Nacion*, October 2, 1980)

138 (*La Prensa*, May 4, 1981)

El Crisol de Razas: Regional Racial Formation in the Northeast

When Lao residents in El Brete relocated to their permanent homes in Chacra 102 in Barrio Yohasá in 1998, the Governor Federico Ramon Puerta alluded to Misiones's multicultural character to frame the event, "*Misiones es un mosaíco multirracial, multicultural y multireligioso, y se busca mejorar la calidad de vida de todos sin distinciones*" (Misiones is a multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious mosaic that seeks to improve the quality of life of all without distinctions).¹³⁹ The Misiones *crisol de razas* (melting pot) racial script has allowed for the slow incorporation of Lao refugees into Misionero regional identity and their induction Posadas's history through the struggle over housing against the EBY.

This process stands in contrast with Asians living in other provinces. One of the main differences between Posadas and Buenos Aires, for instance, is that Posadas has been less concerned with a perceived "Laotianization" of its neighborhoods or places. In the 40+ years since their arrival, there have been few instances with posadeños protesting the 'ethnic' character of some parts of El Brete, or the Lao neighborhoods of Yohasá and San Isidro. In Buenos Aires, the "Koreanizing" of its neighborhoods has been labelled a problem, "[H]ence, mainstream Argentine society calls attention to the problematic "Koreanizing" of urban neighborhoods that have been "taken over" by signs in hangul (the Korean alphabet), the odor of Korean food, and the clamor of an unknown language. While concerns of nineteenth-and twentieth-century eugenics focused on eradicating degenerative Chinese and Indians, contemporary Argentine discourse expresses the

139 *Territorio*, September 16, 1998.

dangers of cultural contagion."¹⁴⁰ In the case of Misiones, I argue that the *crisol de razas* narrative has led to a different form of incorporation that does not rest on the threat of cultural contagion, as Kim points out.

Although earlier in their arrival Lao cultural practices were the basis for their othering in Misiones, currently their cultural difference has been absorbed into multicultural ideology. Perhaps due to the economic precariousness of the community, their presence in Posadas has not devolved into the perception that they are economic rivals to “Argentines,” or that they are taking jobs. In this overview of Lao refugee settlements in Posadas, I look to this rural-urban hybrid border town *located in the Global South* in a historical moment when most of the world’s population is urban and does not reside in American or European cities. The form of urbanity visible reflects the changing relations between Asia and Latin America in the 21st century. What appears as peripheral and outside Buenos Aires-based representations of the nation in reality captures some of the new urban forms produced by 21st century neoliberal capitalism.

The Lao diaspora in Misiones reveals the city’s transnational features, linking Posadas to the world; cities in the US like Arkansas, Baltimore, California, Florida, Texas, Philadelphia, and New York, in addition to connections to Laos, France, and provinces all over Argentina.

140 Junyoung Veronica Kim, “Disrupting the “White Myth”: Korean Immigration to Buenos Aires and National Imaginaries,” in *Imagining Asia in the Americas*, eds. Maria Zelideth Rivas and Debbie Lee-DiStefano (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 41

Conclusion

Latin-Asian American city-making in the Global South centers the trajectory of Lao refugees in Argentina to think about the multiple factors at play in the creation of community and marginalized people's use of space. This project illuminates the contours of *una Argentina asiática*, an Asian Argentina, through the paths which led Lao refugees to settle permanently in Misiones. In following the trajectory of Lao refugees, this work makes the case that Argentine immigration policy in the late 20th century represents a shift characterized by a turn towards Asia that is in contrast to Argentina's historical reliance on European immigration schemes to propel national economic interests. This research will be of interest to scholars thinking about Asian-Latin American connections in general, and specifically to those who seek to theorize contemporary ties between both geographies through the lens of population movements. This dissertation muddles the strict geographical divides from which both regions are imagined.

Latin-Asian American city-making in the Global South discusses the role played by Southeast Asian refugees' in shaping urbanisms in peripheral spaces situated in disempowered cities in the Global South. In this way, I extend a conversation about the role of Asian migration in contemporary Latin American societies by demonstrating that the dictatorship's Decree 2073 articulated race and labor in relational ways which linked the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees to prior experiences with East Asian immigration policy in Argentina. This work argues that two features shape the Argentine state's immigration approach towards Asia; a labor maximizing logic and capital maximizing logic. Lest the top-down nature of these programs lead us to think that social life neatly and blindly adheres to policy, Lao refugee oral histories show that Lao refugees

maneuvered the direction of their lives, beyond the binary of resistance and submission, in spite of the Decree's initial constraints and the social conflicts that accompanied their settlement in Argentina.

It is in this context of resettlement to Argentina and eventual relocation to Posadas that I write about Posadas as a focal point of modern nation-building processes, and not as the fringe appendage of modern nation-building. The capital city of Posadas in the northeastern Misiones province is the site of Argentina's largest hydroelectric dam, the Yacyretá Dam, and as a borderland it is a focal point that injects life into commodity exchanges through the entrepot commerce connecting Paraguay to Buenos Aires' street markets. My work argues that this 'peripheral' city in Argentina is an initial dot in a grid whose paths lead us to the informal distribution of agricultural products between Asian immigrants, like fresh peanuts, ginger, and other vegetables produced by small-scale Lao farmers in Posadas. These goods make their way to Buenos Aires' Chinese immigrant family's dinner tables, in one example, and in another, they land in the federal capital's informal street markets.

On a more abstract note, these last four decades of Lao city-making in Argentina show the effects of post-Cold War global integration from the viewpoint of Lao refugees. Broadly, the history of the Lao in Argentina shed light onto the realities produced by both Cold War era militarisms and the urbanisms resulting from large-scale development projects. Lao city-making also underlines the hardships resulting from conditions of neoliberal state retrenchment and highlights the vacuums left when the state withdraws from supporting refugee and immigrant populations and the racialized meanings that emerge from this context.

The specificity of Argentina's dominant national identity myths ground this analysis of regional racial formation. The agglutinating, port-based boat mythology that captures racial formations in Buenos Aires, for example, is discussed in relationship to the tropical northeast that incorporated Lao refugees without positioning them as economic threats to the livelihoods of criollos. This work gestures towards a regional understanding of racial formation in Argentina and makes the case for the study of Asian Argentina from this capaciousness in order to nuance understandings of Asian racialization in Argentina. Ultimately, this work pushes us to think about a Latin-Asian America from the perspective of recent history and beyond US-centric understandings of Asian America. It is my hope that future research on these areas continues to consider the impact that economic and political developments between Asia and Latin America has on the Asian diaspora in the Americas as the relationship between these two geographies continues to merit scholarly attention attuned to the experiences of the working poor. *Latin-Asian American city-making in the Global South* is my modest contribution to these efforts.

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