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DIASPORIC IM/MOBILITIES

Migrants, Returnees, Deportees, Expats, Tourists, and Beyond in the Vietnamese Homeland

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Introduction

“Don’t get involved with protests,” my mother constantly warned me, “The communists will never let you go back to Vietnam.” My mom feared the impact of my budding political involvement on my future ability to travel abroad. With paranoia stemming from the war, she believed that my activities would also affect my family’s travel abilities and that she would be put on some no-entry list due to my activities. As a child of postwar refugees, I had little direct connection to the homeland, but my possible exile from it caused much worry for my refugee mother who hoped to retire or visit comfortably in the place she once called home. Meanwhile, there are Vietnamese Americans who are sent back to Vietnam against their will.

Some Vietnamese Americans are voluntarily reconnecting with their homeland, while others are being forcibly deported to it. Given this discrepancy, this chapter explores the forms and dynamics of im/mobility of diasporic Vietnamese. Scholars of return migration and the anthropology of mobility have considered the ways in which “homecoming” is vexed for those who have departed and returned to their homeland (Blitz et al., 2005; Djordjevic, 2013; Wang, 2013). In this chapter, I provide telling instances to enrich our understanding of the dynamics and intersections between exiles, tourists, and migrants, alternating subject positions that implicate moving/stuck Vietnamese Americans. My first example considers exiled Vietnamese who returned to Vietnam as tourists but were detained while there and ultimately expelled from Vietnam. Counterposed to them are “criminal aliens” brought back under duress to Vietnam by the United States, despite not being desired by the Vietnamese government. My second example refers to those Vietnamese Americans who have returned to the Vietnamese homeland to work and/or live and the fluctuating positionalities they occupy as expats/tourists. My analytic focus is on diasporic im/mobilities, a prism that combines the mobility of

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members in dispersed postwar communities with the overlapping immobility of others across multi-dimensional spaces.

A growing number of scholars use the concept of return mobilities (rather than simply migration) to describe alternative pathways and transits of repatriated, international students, border-crossers, migrant laborers, holiday vacationers, business-people, and diplomats (Keles, 2022; King and Christou, 2011; Winogrodzka and Grabowska, 2021). Less attention has been paid to immobilities than to mobilities, and how human movement (and its associated meanings) is made difficult or tenuous for those associated with conquered or defunct states (Saraiva and Sardinha, 2016). For members of the South Vietnamese diaspora, I argue that the im/mobilities of migrant workers, tourists, the forcibly repatriated, and retired expats are inextricable from the Vietnam–American War’s geopolitical divisions. As refugees from a fallen “ghost nation,” their historic status as political exiles and forced migrants adds layered meanings to their “tourist” label (or any label) in present-day Vietnam.

To explain this complex phenomenon, first I provide background on Vietnamese postwar exile and contemporary migration. I situate the reasons why resettled refugees remain unsettled, traversing various landscapes of belonging. After this historical discussion, I discuss the case of criminalized Vietnamese Americans sent back to Vietnam against their will. My online ethnography considers the US tourists of Vietnamese descent imprisoned/exiled by the communist party. Two cases are presented here – those expelled from the United States to Vietnam and those expelled from Vietnam back to the United States. The online ethnography refers only to the second case, while the material for the first case is based on social media and newspaper analysis because I was not in Vietnam when the individuals mentioned were arrested for “subversive” activities. The forcibly repatriated, meanwhile, are part of an ongoing process.

The final section provides ethnographic accounts of expats and tourists, who find it difficult to locate themselves in rapidly changing Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon, the former capital of the South Vietnamese republic. Some expats are still working while others are retired, but many are often confused for tourists. Based on these case studies, I call for increased research about diasporic im/mobilities of subjects finding their way in a world where they do not always fit.

Historical/Political Migrants: Refugees to and From the Homeland

This section highlights the fact that Vietnamese migrants who return to Vietnam are not all the same. Here, we can differentiate between those who opt to move to Vietnam because of the economic opportunities there and those reared in the United States but expelled by the US government for minor infractions under a tough-on-crime stance. Sometimes, those deportees who are forcibly returned often alone without family sit on the same planes with Vietnamese who have been exiled for decades and are now returning to see their families again.

Today, the communist government welcomes Vietnamese Americans as potential sources of foreign capital while simultaneously casting aspersion on these returnees. Thousands of Vietnamese fled as refugees in 1975 after the fall of South Vietnam to communist forces, and thousands more departed later as economic migrants due to postwar instability. After diplomatic normalizations between Vietnam and the United States in 1995, a growing cohort of overseas Vietnamese made their way back to Vietnam for work, family, nostalgia, or pleasure, while others refused to ever return in protest of the country's authoritarian regime. Yet not all come back voluntarily or feel at ease upon return.

Many refugees headed to the United States did not imagine they would ever step back in the country that they left behind “forever.” But their experiences as refugee-turned-returnee yield critical insight into a war-torn diasporic population and its country that no longer formally exists. My analysis is inspired by Natalia Bloch's study of Tibetans in India and her concept of “community embedded in mobility” (2018).¹ South Vietnamese national subjects come from a nation-state viewed as illegitimate, a country that has vanished, which complicates their diasporic returns to the “homeland.”

An important factor to consider is how the Vietnamese state polices ethnic Vietnamese-speaking people when they reenter the Vietnamese territory. The interlaced concepts of migration, tourism, and exile inform an investigation into the spatiotemporal disorientations of diasporic return. Since the 1990s, more than 60 Vietnamese Americans have been repatriated against their will with thousands of deportation orders pending. As ethnic studies scholar Ly Thuy Nguyen (2021) writes, “Deportation takes the form of political exile . . . to control borders and regulate entry based on membership” (p. 17–18).

These individuals never volunteered to come back to Vietnam and actively plead and cry out to remain in the United States. Their forced return poses issues, both epistemological and social. How can this double exiled group – once from Vietnam and then from the United States – be characterized? How do we relate forced returnees from the United States to people exiled from Vietnam? Within a Southeast Asian country governed by “red capitalism” or “market-oriented socialism,” divisions between tourist, migrant, and exile are blurred. The criminal line between Cold War friend and enemy persists despite a porous global flow of ideas, capital, and bodies across borders. While all homeland returns involve some emotional ambivalence, the post/socialist context lends additional confusion (Gasviani, 2019; Schwenkel, 2015; Zhang, 2012). In contemporary Vietnam, the ambivalence manifests in the form of “strategies of inclusion towards its diaspora” (Duong, 2016: p. 165). These strategies include perks such as multi-year tourist visas. Vietnamese Americans embody the tensions between two countries formerly at war, but which now operate as trade partners and yet do not fully trust one another. Those visiting the Socialist Republic of Vietnam can be treated simultaneously as insiders and outsiders. Former South Vietnamese veterans once held in communist reeducation camps can later transform into domestic tourists, even though their painful stigma as former prisoners of war and enemies of the communist state continues to haunt them.

Although they may superficially look the same and follow the same physical paths as other foreign tourists, Vietnamese diasporic returnees are situated differently. A Vietnamese American visiting Vietnam on a tourist/student visa and a criminal “alien” sent back by force both traverse the same kind of geographic space, albeit under very divergent circumstances. Anthropologist Michaela Di Leonardo (2018) addresses ethnic identity and how factors like class play into migrants’ situational shifts. As with Italian migrants to the United States who move back to Italy, class and cohort matter for Vietnamese returnees. Those returning to Vietnam are often young adult professionals looking for jobs, tourists, or expats/retirees.

We must constantly challenge identification categories like tourist, migrant, and exile as isolated status markers that exceed the ideological boundaries of the nation (Su, 2017). Juxtaposing those categories, I believe ethnographically grounded examples offer more nuanced understandings of these individuals traversing nationality, legality, and globality. Methodologically, I document online communities and social media networks of deportees. The COVID-19 pandemic limited my ability to return to Vietnam, as I usually do every other summer. I began this project during an unprecedented global lockdown, which arrested migration and shuttered tourism while turning many into temporary exiles. Thus, my ethnography is by necessity virtual and discursive, drawing on news sources and online interviews. The anthropology of mobility is a field that transpires on rapidly shifting grounds. Despite the changing international landscape, the experiences of voluntary returnees with a punitive one-party state resonate with criminalized migrants forcibly brought to Vietnam by the US carceral regime. Thus, I turn to discuss the im/mobilities of criminalized diasporic populations and political exiles.

Political/Legal Exiles: Forced Returns and the Criminally Expelled

To better understand US-born Vietnamese visitors deported to or exiled from Vietnam, we must consider what the United States and Vietnamese criminalizing processes expose, namely, the distinct forms of im/mobilities for diasporic Vietnamese caught in the crosshairs of “national security.” The distinction between voluntary and involuntary migrants blurs upon closer examination of the deportee who is sent from the United States to Vietnam. Under a tough-on-crime and anti-immigration stance, President Donald Trump vigorously pursued the deportation of “alien” non-citizens. Many of these people did not obtain citizenship, because they arrived in the United States as children and they and their parents did not understand the naturalization process. Some were even born in the refugee camps, so did not have Vietnamese citizenship either. An agreement signed by Vietnam and the United States in 2008 stipulated that only those Vietnamese who arrived after July 12, 1995 (the date the countries re-established diplomatic relations) could be repatriated. Trump wanted to push that timeline to an even earlier time, though it was understood migrants who came before that date were refugees (Pearson, 2018). A former US ambassador to Vietnam, Ted Osius, viewed deportation as a broken

promise to refugees: “Their country doesn’t exist. South Vietnam isn’t a country anymore . . . It’s ludicrous to claim they’re being sent back to their country . . . which many of them fought for half their lives” (Dunst, 2018). Deporting people who are not wanted in the receiving “enemy” country renders them vulnerable, putting them in a precarious position as double exiles.²

Refugees with criminal records encountered deportation orders as adults from old criminal convictions. Many of the Vietnamese being deported had been brought here to the United States as refugees when very young. Some may have been arrested for things like drug possession in their teen years.³ Arrest records for minors are usually less punitive than for adults, but when harsher laws were imposed (e.g., California’s “three strikes” law), those with long-forgotten arrest records were suddenly deported or “repatriated” back to Vietnam, even though some of them had absolutely no memories of life in Vietnam and a few had no relatives at all.⁴ The implication is these people are being sent back “home,” but they consider the United States their home, as they have lived there for most of their lives. Vietnamese American activists opposed to deportation practices underscore how “the refugee becomes a mode of knowledge production and a critical disruption of hegemonic ideologies, inviting a poetic and political engagement with the forces of power” (Nguyen, 2016: p. 172). Militarized police states endowed with powers of arbitrary detention and with access to personal information shape the unique experiences of exiled deportees, whose micro-narratives and politics do not align with the governments that disavow them.

On Facebook, we find stories like those of Cuong Pham, a mixed-race person who came to the United States at the age of 20 in 1990 on a program for Amerasians, and in the busy-ness of working and becoming a father, never applied for citizenship. In 2000, at the age of 30, he was convicted of indecent assault and battery of children, a sex crime. In 2007, he was convicted of driving under the influence. These are problems linked to the traumas of war and forced migration (Kwan, 2019). Pham was deported on a plane that deposited other deportees in Burma/Myanmar and Cambodia before reaching Vietnam. In Vietnam, he faced difficulty in finding work and received little support from the Vietnamese government which viewed outsiders like him with great suspicion, only receiving them due to diplomatic coercion.

Before introducing findings, my methodology of virtual ethnography requires clarification. Starting in 2018, I monitored various social media sites, including a Facebook group (Southeast Asian Freedom Network) and Twitter for over two years, tracking threats and prominent stories. Some sites were not studied due to privacy issues, such as the Facebook group “Southeast Asian Deportation Public Group” which is for those personally affected or touched by deportation. What I found however from reading the publicly available stories online was that the Vietnamese American deportee remains contested as an identity-in-becoming, one where the sense of betrayal by the United States contributed to their rising political consciousness (Zialcita, 1995). When the Trump presidency transitioned over to Biden, there was still no halt to deportations, especially for a new

Democratic president and congress majority hampered by the legal rules of the previous administration.⁵

Netizens were unflagging in their criticism of ICE deportations. Individuals, reporters, and groups like the Asian Prisoner Support Committee put pressure on Biden not to deport individuals like 29-year-old Ngoc Tran, who was deported by the United States in 2017 for drug convictions incurred as a minor, for which she served time. The Orange County California resident and mother was separated from her children due to her deportation. Tracy La, executive director of the Vietnamese American progressive group VietRISE, consistently spotlights women like Tran, linking their working-class vulnerability and lack of mobility to misogynist violence, as evidenced in the 2021 killing of six Asian spa workers in the city of Atlanta. She tweets, “I believe this violence has been invisibilized . . . I know so many people facing deportation who don’t want people to know about it.”⁶

To illustrate the diasporic im/mobilities of people affected by the same policies but who were not deported, consider the case of Nam Phong Le, who was not deported due to having US citizenship. Despite going to Vietnam multiple times as a tourist to offer humanitarian aid to orphans, this former social worker found his life upended when he was jailed for stealing retirement benefits from elderly expats in Vietnam. As a 1.5-generation refugee who came to the United States at 11 years old, Le had grown up in poor crime-ridden neighborhoods. Eventually, he got a college education and became a federally employed social worker, returning to Vietnam multiple times as a volunteer tourist to provide humanitarian aid to orphans. Had he not received citizenship as an adult, he would have automatically been sent back to Vietnam. Ironically, Le now wants to return to the homeland permanently, where he hopes to find work which seems elusive for him in the United States due to his status as a felon. Caught in a bind, the 38-year-old feels the need to become an “expat” in Vietnam (in terms of lifestyle), as he remains exiled from the US work system. Growing up in the United States, having arrived in the United States as a child, the Californian speaks English fairly well and was able to obtain a college education. His cultural capital and economic potential as a college-educated Vietnamese American were undercut by his status as a criminalized person. The stories of people like Le demonstrate the ironies of mutually exclusive taxonomies like citizens, tourists, exiles, and migrants.

Vietnamese American returnees enter spaces where they meet locals, immigrants, and non-Vietnamese foreign tourists with whom they share linguistic terrain (English). New norms engendered by these exchanges break presumptions surrounding who people are, what they do, and where they come from (Lee, 2017). Many returnees meet online in support groups, or they meet in cafes, bars, and parks, but generally, they are “off the grid,” trying to blend in with the rest of the Vietnamese population (Dunst, 2018). Moving from being “deportable refugees” in the United States to transnational subjects in Vietnam, these “cosmopolitan” exiles residing in Vietnam often find themselves in socially fluid/ambiguous spaces like tourism, where they can find employment as translators, a situation similar to that of Cambodian American deportees (Zelnick, 2018).

This mishmash of labels reveals what sociologist Victoria Reyes (2019) calls a “global borderland” defined by “spatialized configurations of inequalities that are based on differences in nationality and class . . . based on the interaction between the foreign and the local” (p. 3). To illustrate this point, consider the researchers converging on Vietnam every summer, many of them listing themselves as tourists rather than researchers to avoid bureaucratic headaches. One such person I encountered during my research is a refugee who came as a teenager to the United States and later became a scholar of Vietnam. This scholar, Bao, met her partner in Vietnam while conducting research. Due to her partner’s political activities, Bao was ultimately placed on a state watchlist.⁷ Wherever I spent time with them in Vietnam, we sensed that someone was watching us; we could not enjoy the peace of mind that most tourists take for granted. As a refugee-turned researcher, Bao, faced trouble as an expungable subject, fearing severed contact with a lover.⁸ Their relationship was strained by politics. Bao told me that white Americans, and women in general, are not monitored to the same extent as Vietnamese American men who are always perceived as suspect criminals, much like the re-educated soldiers of South Vietnam. This example speaks volumes about how gendered racialized categories like “tourist” versus returning former “exile” or “refugee” color not only the government’s perceptions but also the actions of Vietnamese American men (domestic or foreign), and women and gendered others too, even if to a lesser extent.

Vietnamese American exiles are suspended between countries that have “forgotten” the refugee’s plight. The nexus of migrant/tourist/exile affords a non-binary language encapsulating the experiences of Vietnamese who visit the homeland and find themselves fearing arrest during their stay. Insofar as Vietnamese American returnees are vigilantly watched by the government for signs of sedition, former overseas Vietnamese are continually at risk of becoming domestic “enemies.” Political scientist Kieu-Linh Valverde (2012) finds that although the Vietnamese government welcomed overseas Vietnamese tourists, “they equally saw the anti-communist overseas population as a direct threat to Vietnam’s stability” (p. ix). While Vietnamese people are found everywhere, the Vietnamese from the United States pose the biggest threat, as this is where most South Vietnamese citizens, elites, and political leaders settled. Vietnam’s ruling party continues to crack down on US returnees’ political activities through vaguely worded penal codes involving categories like “undermining national unity” and “conducting propaganda against the state” (Human Rights Watch, 2016).⁹

Given the Vietnamese government’s perception of returnees – be they tourists, researchers, retirees, or expunged refugees – as potential subversives and incendiaries, casual visits can prove risky. This is seen in the case of Michael Nguyen, a working-class 1.5-generation Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States at the age of 10. Nguyen ran an Orange County (California) printing shop and served as the primary caregiver to four daughters. While vacationing in Vietnam in 2019, Nguyen was removed from a tour bus by communist apparatchiks, arrested,

and placed in the foreigners' section of a Vietnamese prison. Government officials accused Nguyen of joining a local organization to buy weapons, conduct subversive activities, and incite everyday people to protest – charges that he denied. Nguyen claimed that he was simply a “tourist” visiting aging relatives on his Vietnam vacation. Tried in a Vietnamese court, Nguyen confessed under police interrogation to discussing Vietnam’s political affairs on the Internet, something construed as treasonous. In this regard, the policing of tourists involves more than monitoring physical travelers and their online activity, as well. Nguyen served only two years of his 12-year sentence before being expelled from the United States (Randall, 2020). US lawmakers like Representative Katie Porter described Nguyen as a man who “sees injustice in the world and wants to do something about it” (Anderson, 2020). Whatever Nguyen’s true intentions, his imprisonment in Vietnam bears relevance for others, as Anh Do, a human rights advocate, underscores: “Look at this person . . . For everyone who returns to Vietnam, this is a warning” (Do, 2019). A month after Michael Nguyen’s arrest, Australian retiree Van Kham Chau was also arrested and sentenced to 12 years in prison. Along with two other co-defendants, the 70-year-old former Republic of Vietnam soldier belonged to the New South Wales chapter of Viet Tan, a group branded as terrorists by Vietnam but labeled a peaceful organization by the United Nations. He was accused of recruiting members, although he denies any such activities in Vietnam, despite crossing into Vietnam via Cambodia with false identity documents.

Like many who left as refugees and “made it” in their new countries, Nguyen and Chau returned to Vietnam with economic privilege, but without political potency. They compose part of a “lost generation of exiles who desire political power” but have yet to achieve it (Valverde, 2012: p. 147). This power asymmetry reveals how circuits of tourism enable refugee/returnee politics, and the threat of banishment makes tourism and engaging in politics something returnees think twice about (or obliges returnees to consider their every mundane action while in Vietnam through the lens of potential criminal accusations).

A year before the imprisonment of Michael Nguyen and Van Kham Chau, another exiled tourist made international headlines. In 2018, Will Nguyen (no relation to Michael), a visiting student completing his studies in Singapore, was held by officials in Ho Chi Minh City. The second-generation Vietnamese American was there on a short vacation while pursuing a graduate degree in Singapore when he became swept up in local demonstrations. These protests opposed two controversial draft bills, a measure on cybersecurity and the other on the designation of special economic zones. The protests Will Nguyen joined were part of a nation-wide mobilization against a proposal that would allow Vietnamese land to be rented by foreigners for up to 99 years – a huge boon to Chinese investors hoping to establish not only assembly work factories but also tourist hotels, gambling casinos, and prime resort areas (Tran, 2018a). Tourism directly links to migration here, given the huge boom in Chinese tourism to Southeast Asia and the government’s ability to displace local populations in favor of rich outsiders.

These developments explain why returning tourists might be willing to risk exile to protect their homeland from interlopers. Will Nguyen explains his decision to protest in an interview:

I was completely awed by this unprecedented display of people power and sought to let the world know what was happening, even tagging international media in some of my Twitter posts. But as the protests grew . . . I began taking a more active role (O'Connell, 2018)¹⁰.

A Vietnamese court convicted Nguyen of disturbing public order and ordered his deportation, sparing him seven years in prison. Nguyen received leniency because he confessed to his crime. He is now a permanent exile from Vietnam, barred from returning.

Nguyen returned to the United States with the US media portraying him as a “defiant” survivor of communist persecution (Foxhall, 2018). Vietnamese state-sponsored media excoriated the outsider/tourist for joining the protests, galvanizing violent action, and plastering protest information online (Chau, 2018). Nguyen's contrasting portrayal in Vietnamese and US media crystallizes a digital “body politics,” whereby inchoate public feelings about the nation and diaspora are expressed (Phuong, 2017). What it means to be a part of an imagined community is changing, much like the categories of exile/migrant/tourist, due to shifts in diasporic im/mobilities.

Journalist Michael Tatarski retweeted one of Nguyen's retweets: “Here we see the benefits of a US passport: 10 Vietnamese nationals were jailed for up to 3 years on the same charges filed against Will Nguyen.”¹¹ The journalist notes how the now-exiled Nguyen finds himself in a different predicament from other imprisoned local human rights defenders:

Nguyen is not a Vietnamese citizen, but an American citizen of Vietnamese descent. This allows him some, albeit limited, “privileges” . . . allowed access to US consular officers, and the authorities have said that his family will be allowed to attend his trial. These are luxuries withheld from many Vietnamese political prisoners, who are often held incommunicado for months – even years – before standing trial (Tran, 2018b).

Nguyen himself invokes his US privilege in a posttrial interview:

I occupied a nebulous zone; they treated me with gloves on but were at relative ease about what they could say to me. I was “same-same, but different” . . . They knew my actions came from a good place, that they were a natural extension of the nationalism that we, Vietnamese, are taught from birth (O'Connell, 2018)¹².

With his captors even apologizing for his criminal treatment, Nguyen reflects on being a foreigner, one who would not be treated as a regular “local” criminal. Nguyen deems himself a Vietnam patriot, even though he was technically a tourist, but this category itself can be further parsed out when we expand our lens to include retirees and expats.

Cultural/Emotional Exiles: Retirees and Expats in the Tourist Trap

“What do you mean I can’t go?!” my mother bellowed with anger at the Vietnamese airline staff. It turned out that her citizenship status, as it appeared in her passport, meant she could not travel to Thailand on a short holiday while visiting Vietnam. As a US permanent resident, she could not travel as freely as her US-born children with their “fully” American passports. Both US and Vietnamese citizens can travel to Thailand without a visa, but she was somewhere in the middle. With no refund possible for this vacation, my sibling and I were obliged to tour Thailand without her. This trip included our aunt and cousin from Vietnam, who as Vietnamese citizens could freely travel through much of Southeast Asia due to reciprocal travel agreements in the region. Stuck in limbo, as she had been for decades, my mom could only await our return.

For over four decades, my mother held the dubious status of a “permanent resident alien” in the United States. An aging woman with only a third-grade education, she failed the citizenship test multiple times. Yet, she felt so proud to be able to afford this surprise gift for the family. The US dollar’s strength in the foreign currency exchange led my mother, a low-wage spa worker, to believe she could be a carefree tourist in her former homeland and other less-expensive countries of the Global South like Thailand. However, her status as an “exile” and her precarity as a non-citizen meant she could not enjoy all the modern-day trappings of a tourist (at least not outside Vietnam).

Tourism has been discussed tangentially in relation to refugee groups (or refugees as tourists), but we need to better understand the returnee’s transition from exile to tourist (Inhorn, 2011). Visits to long-lost family members and countries count as tourism, but the gratification of visiting family can be cut short or lost with the prospect of permanent exile or imprisonment (as seen in the examples of Will Nguyen and Michael Nguyen). There is a sociopolitical dimension to the VFR Tourism designation, especially in low-income countries where that is the dominant form of tourism (Pearce and Moscardo, 2005). VFR closely links families in Vietnam and abroad, such that the tourists visiting their family members are not perceived as neutral. Moreover, they can be envisioned as potentially infecting their Vietnamese kin with foreign ideas and thoughts. Media accounts of Vietnamese visitors arrested for suspicious activity invariably cast a shadow over others who merely arrive on holiday or for longer-term stays.

Despite the privileges they enjoy as Americans in Vietnam, diasporic returnees face other issues. Their symbolic association with a former enemy state perceived

by communists as a puppet for the United States places an eternal stigma on them as political exiles (Bui, 2018). In my book *Returns of War*, I examined the shift from studying refugee politics to returnee politics, through an ethnography of Vietnamese American youth raised in the United States, who moved back to work or live in Vietnam (to the chagrin of their anticommunist elders).¹³ My interviews with returnees revealed that many did not know how to label themselves in a country where it is hard for anyone, Vietnamese or not, to immigrate and settle permanently. According to United Nations data, Vietnam contains the smallest proportion of foreign-born populations after China (Kopf, 2017).¹⁴ Tourism becomes the means for Vietnam to attract foreign income and remains the primary or initial means by which returnees come back, although a burgeoning number of them are economic migrants and retirees. While over four million Vietnamese live abroad, less than an estimated 3,000 overseas Vietnamese have returned permanently to Vietnam.¹⁵ Often yoked to leisure and entertainment, tourism encompasses many activities, but Vietnamese returnee tourism in Vietnam takes on specific forms, including medical tourism (surgery), educational tourism (study abroad), and “voluntourism” (visiting orphanages). Cultural tourism, the biggest category of all, provides a window into distributions of power and value.¹⁶

The im/mobilities of diaspora refract the multiple privileges of citizenship and forms of cultural exile (Nadurata, 2019: p. 40). Expats with US citizenship may feel emboldened to speak their views, knowing they might be protected by the US government, but they know that they can be arrested, surveilled, and imprisoned, simply for being an outsider.

When I first visited the South Vietnamese historical archives in Ho Chi Minh City to examine war documents for my research, a staff member immediately shooed me away without reason, based on my Americanized appearance, accent, and affiliation with a foreign school. When I returned weeks later, hoping she had forgotten me by then, I pretended to be a clueless tourist who was curious about the library and just wanted to peruse the artifacts. I received immediate admission. This white lie (I was a tourist after all) carried unknown penalties and fear of repercussions. Where does the position of adult tourist begin and where does my status as the child of the diaspora end? Exile/tourism/migration involves more than physical acts of removal/escape; they can be fluid states of mind. As the progeny of Vietnamese refugees including a parent who was a military veteran of the South Vietnamese army, I embodied the enemy, even if I appeared “same-same, but different” to institutional gatekeepers.

Through the diaspora and its varying forms of im/mobility, we can ask: When, where, and how does a refugee (or a child of refugees) who returns to Vietnam – as opposed to Vietnamese economic immigrants of the 1990s onward – feel like a “perpetual foreigner”? Does this person feel like a tourist when traveling with mostly non-Vietnamese tourist caravans from China, South Korea, and Australia? What of aging refugee returnees in Vietnam living on fixed incomes, with modest lifestyles relative to US standards but rich by local standards? In all cases, we must ask if movement and status are forced or willful, permanent, or temporary. Does

the returnee enter a high or low social position? Does an expat ever cease being an exile? How does a refugee transform into a retiree in the country they left?

Overseas retirees or expats are terms used to describe those people who stay outside their home countries temporarily or permanently. But returning Vietnamese are more than that; they view the United States as their adopted homeland even while linked mentally to their original home. Former refugee Andrew Lam (2018) writes extensively on the personal politics of homeland returns. He worked as a journalist and writer, before retiring permanently in Vietnam. In an online piece entitled “There and Back Again: A Vietnamese Journey,” Lam reflects on his blended life in Vietnam as a permanent resident and occasional tourist. At the Cu Chi Tunnel, famous for hiding communist guerillas during the war, he encountered US vets who had done military tours but now circled back to Vietnam as commercial tourists. This tourist site also drew Vietnamese nationals enraptured by the allure of going abroad. Lam observes,

The middle-aged vets teared up gazing at an old war wound, but [for] the young tour guide . . . She readily confessed that, for her, the tunnel was a relic about which she knew nothing until she got her job . . . ‘So you live in California? My dream is to go for a visit.

This young woman hoped to save money for California destinations like Disneyland, Universal Studios, Golden Gate Bridge, and Yosemite Park. If the “tunnel runs toward the bloody past,” he concludes, “for this young woman, it leads toward a touristy future.” Lam recounts this maxim from a friend that the crossing of borders does not “have to be *outside* of Vietnam,” but that these days even “middle-class Vietnamese fly overseas to shop.”

Analyzing Lam’s narrative of diasporic return, literary scholar Begoña Simal González (2014) believes the writer’s “discrepant cosmopolitanism” works across dichotomies as part of a generation that is highly mobile but less politically sensitive compared to their anticommunist elders. González calls attention to the younger generation (now middle-aged or of retirement age) since their patchwork mobile consciousness comprises synchronic moments that do not cohere into any conventional sense of origin and destination. They are part of the diaspora, but their diasporic identifications are unmoored.

Besides being a top Southeast Asian tourist destination, Vietnam is a hotspot for retirees (Quy, 2020). With newly passed laws that enabled foreigners to own real estate (but not land outright), Vietnam opened its doors to investors to supplement remittances. With preferential treatment and faster approval for business permits, well-to-do diasporans are settling in Vietnam amid familiar comforts like the American-style suburbs “to which they grew accustomed during their exile” (Ly, 2003).¹⁷ My research participant Lam constitutes part of the 1.5 generation. With a child’s memory of the war, Lam had returned to Vietnam to find his “roots,” before settling there permanently. His father was a high-ranking South Vietnamese military officer, so his family was obliged to flee. Well-connected people who did

not escape as refugees were exiled from communist civic life and the mainstream economy. Yet, his wealthy family held onto some financial assets that allowed Lam to return/retire comfortably in senior-friendly Vietnam.

Yet, the haunting memory of war persists as a collective wound for all in the South Vietnamese diaspora, and this trauma is where the psychic life of the tourist/expat resonates with that of the migrant/deportee and exile/prisoner – despite wildly disparate experiences. I interviewed finance worker and television producer Anh-Thu Nguyen who grew up as a Vietnamese American born in the United States. She now resides in the Little Tokyo enclave of District One, the most touristy part of Saigon. While bouncing around nice restaurants with Nguyen, I asked her how she identifies. She was clearly at pains to label herself, alternating between “Vietnamese” and “foreigner,” despite having lived in Vietnam for over a decade.¹⁸ She hesitated to embrace the term “immigrant” as, for her, it connotes economic struggle, which she did not quite know compared to her refugee parents. Equally problematic was the term “expat,” which for Nguyen connoted the retired “Aus-sies” hanging out in bars or the Korean foreign workers shackled up in their suburban condos. She did not know where she would retire, debating whether to go back to the US or stay in Vietnam forever.

The homeland orientations of Nguyen’s own family are polarizing. Her mother enjoys coming back every year to visit family, but her father has only returned twice since 1975. She attributed his reluctance to the trauma he experienced as a persecuted former soldier in reeducation camps run by the communist victors. The parents’ competing senses of homeland as well as tourism (aversion versus attraction) frame Nguyen’s mental vacillation and liminality of “being always here and there.”

Like Lam and Le, Nguyen is open about her queer identity and participated in Vietnam’s first LGBT+ public pride events in Vietnam. Their stories tell me that the intersection of exile, migration, and tourism operates via the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Piña, 2022). Attention to queer exiles (estranged from the nation/family), sexual migrants (denied same-sex marriage visas), and LGBT tourists (surveilled for “morality” and appearance) shape the subcultures not visible to the heteronormative eye, as anthropologist Natalie Newton (2012) found in her study of “les” women in Saigon, which bound together in a subculture of foreign and local lesbians. Diasporic im/mobilities hinge on the condition of queer diasporas. That is, we need to consider how to “queer” the given binary of Vietnamese national outsider and insider, given that queer people are frequently relegated to the outside of the biological and national family. In doing so, we recognize that non-binary subjects are already profiled as “subversive” to heteronormative cultures and societies.

During the earlier phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nguyen feared returning to the United States, since Vietnam was safely handling the crisis while the United States was an epicenter of infection at the time. If she left Vietnam and attempted to return, she would be barred or put in the foreigner/tourist category, obliged to pay for lodging and quarantine accommodations in a hotel, even though

she has a home in Vietnam. In a time of global lockdown, the question of exile/migrant/tourism entails new geographic alignments and border closures, turning tourists into temporary exiles and isolated captives. Nguyen, like other expats, debated going back to the United States to receive her COVID-19 shots, given Vietnam's shortage. This would require an indefinite stay until Vietnam reopens and being barred from the adoptive/ancestral homeland. Nguyen and others' intent to return to the United States for vaccinations differs from the "medical tourism" of non-citizen travelers coming to the United States to do the same thing. The diasporic im/mobilities of return exceed any singular frame in a world that is changing as fast as the people moving (or not) within it.

Conclusions

This study highlighted the ambiguous status of Vietnamese Americans exiled to and from Vietnam. It considers the tenuous standing of precarious subjects from overseas migrant communities in their diasporic im/mobilities, whether as former refugees or children of refugees. By tracking the transits and trappings of the repatriated deportee and (deportable) tourist, I offer an avenue for expanding upon studies of exile, tourism, and migration. In juxtaposing discussions of the plight of the deportee with that of Vietnamese American expats, I invite us to ponder other avenues for studying im/mobile people in a more politicized fashion. This contrasting discourse resists the tendency to apply "politics" only to people who are arrested and deported by the Vietnam or US government. Someone working or retired in Vietnam can be repatriated based on a range of social activities. In highlighting the politics of im/mobility alongside the stories of Vietnamese American refugees, their offspring, and loved ones in the homeland, we can glean empathy (or the limits of it) for these groups and others, and an appreciation of the complexities shaping their translocal lives. Implicit in the cases presented here is that we ask not only where people belong, but whether we care enough to attend to their specific needs. There is an ethics to exile.¹⁹

When members of the postwar South Vietnamese diaspora return to their homeland, it is never clear what they are returning to, given the circuitous detours taken by migratory subjects, from activism to entertainment. Their diasporic im/mobilities illustrate how the simple meanings attached to terms such as tourist, refugee, and migrant appear at odds with what is happening on the ground. My examples speak to the incommensurability of multi-sited living. In these instances, we find critical voices that can address the multiple worlds which we traverse and are, sometimes, held in place.

Notes

- 1 Bloch's (2018) study of Tibetan refugees in India tracks a range of mobile subjects that include newcomers, second-generation refugees, seasonal migrants, tourists, and expats. She found that no one single term captures the community's diversity and levels of dispersion.

- 2 On an international level, Trump's deportation policy forced poorer nations to take America's "criminals." It imposed international pressure with threats of visa sanctions on any "recalcitrant" country. Such hardline policies retraumatize refugee communities and tear families apart by sending refugees into countries from which they are estranged, indifferent, or adverse to them.
- 3 Postwar resettlement programs for Vietnamese refugees lacked full institutional support, resulting in high rates of gang activity and "deportability" (Chow, 2005).
- 4 In this state, a punitive "three strikes" law punishes individuals for life due to small crimes, and felony charges that dissolve their legal permanent status and prevent them from ever applying to citizenship (Lum, 2018).
- 5 This coincided with the dozens of Vietnamese deported to Vietnam from Cambodia and banned from entering the country for years.
- 6 See https://twitter.com/_TracyLa/status/1377049103545212930 (Accessed: May 31, 2021). Given the sensitive legal issues faced by individuals posting on these sites, I revealed my research objectives but did not contact or chat with any of the people who were active in these groups. Instead, I conducted a deep active online presence to understand different sorts of experiences shared by the members of these groups.
- 7 This is a pseudonym used to protect my colleague's identity.
- 8 She would also be facing disenfranchisement from the country on which her credentials as a scholar are based. That would mean a lot of retooling as a scholar, probably not something she would take lightly.
- 9 This relates to the Cuban case, where Cuban Americans are treated as corrosive agents by Cuba's communist government (Gosin, 2017; Bradford, 2016).
- 10 A YouTube video posted by an anonymous source showed Nguyen bleeding from his head, beaten, and dragged through the street by plain-clothed police.
- 11 Twitter @miketataraski (July 23, 2018).
- 12 "Same same but different" is a common expression throughout parts of Asia and speaks to contradiction and cultural connection.
- 13 I did ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam between 2008 and 2016, a time of great anxiety a confusion over the future of the diaspora. I found that while ordinary people in Vietnam welcomed old friends and opportunities for cultural exchange, they are critical of overseas Vietnamese and their display of arrogance, ignorance, and wealth.
- 14 Vietnamese nationals' passports only allow them to visit 40 countries. Vietnam is one of the countries with the least powerful passport rankings, according to the World Economic Forum's Passport Index. In contrast, the passports of Vietnamese from the United States placed third overall on passport power rankings, enabling US citizens to freely roam the planet with abandon and protection (VnExpress, 2016).
- 15 This figure does not include those who repeatedly renew their three-month visas (VietnamNet Bridge, 2011).
- 16 In their study of Vietnamese Australian returnees in Vietnam, Thu Nguyen and Brian King (1998) examine ethnic tourism and Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism, focusing on acts performed by migrants and long-term exiles to reestablish heritage links. Whereas the Vietnamese American tourists they interviewed showed positive optimism for Vietnam's future and society, longtime Vietnamese expats living in Vietnam voiced concerns about the country's political situation, unsatisfactory sanitary conditions, and personal safety.
- 17 This news article follows the life of Linda Vo who owns a spacious California-styled mansion in a "Viet Kieu Village" near Ho Chi Minh City's riverfront and drives an SUV with American flag pillows. Unlike the European or Korean foreign expats, this ethnic expat remembers a prior era: "Here, we remember America . . . There, we remember Vietnam. We have two countries. Maybe someday, we will lose our memory and it won't matter."
- 18 While VK used to be derogatory, according to An-Thu Nguyen, it was reclaimed or neutralized, but the feeling of being a cultural outsider remained. This was mostly due to her heavy American accent while speaking Vietnamese.

- 19 All my research participants told me that upon returning to Vietnam, they felt more authentically Vietnamese, even if they encountered social barriers to acceptance. Despite policing by a “corrupt, failed socialist government,” as well as experiences of “racism and isolation,” international travel enables these globetrotters to be more routed than rooted, concomitantly “coming home” and “going away” (Small, 2013, p. 73).

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