

# Tomorrow I Leave—Vietnamese refugee reunion tours as a politics of aesthetics

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Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not...

—Jacques Rancière

“I lived in Pulau Bidong 1978” captions Duc N. Ly’s blog post, January 9, 2007.<sup>1</sup> As of 2010, there were one hundred and four responses. Most include the dates of their stay on the island and many, their boat numbers. The listing of boat numbers seems to function not only to make contact with those who may have journeyed with them, but also as a method by which an inexplicable and horrifying past may become legible in the present moment. Pulau Bidong is one of several islands in Malaysia where Vietnamese refugees were interned before being accepted by a third country or repatriated to Vietnam. Some 250,000 refugees were processed there between 1978 and 1991. Their period of residence varied from a couple months to several years. In 1979 Bidong Island, one-half square mile in area, had a population of 40,000. It was said to be the most heavily populated place on earth. Within the last decade, stories have surfaced on the web and in local Southeast Asian newspapers

(*Jakarta Post, New Straits Times*) reporting on Vietnamese, often from Australia, Canada, or the U.S., who have gathered together for reunions at their former refugee camps.<sup>2</sup> What kinds of identities are articulated through this blend of trauma and heritage tourism? Can these reunion tours be understood as performative rituals in which those caught in a contradiction between worlds, as Rancière puts it, can enact a “politics of aesthetics”? Refugee reunion tours performatively re-enact and reaffirm a drama of survival that is haunted by the refrain of freedom—the sustaining ideal that drove thousands to leave their nations and extended families in hopes of attaining. Today these memorializing tours perhaps symbolically seal that ideal, for only survivors are free to return to honor their past.

People whose histories are shaped by colonialism and war are thrown into circumstances that render their identities dual at minimum and frequently in conflict. Refugees who were granted asylum and settled in the West maintain a complicated relation to at least a triad of states: the state from which they fled, the site of their initial internment, and their countries of resettlement. Since Benedict Anderson defined the nation as an imagined community in 1983, all of these terms—nation, imagination, and community—have acquired their own contested histories.<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall captures some of this complexity in discussing cross-border peoples:

People who belong to more than one world...inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home...who, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures...speak from the “in-between” of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being the same as and at the same time different from, the others amongst whom they live.<sup>4</sup>

Former refugees occupy an “in-between” space, and although they may be assimilated within their adopted countries, they belong to an imagined

community that is not bound to the nation-state. For those who do not principally identify with the nation, Peter Hitchcock proposes imaginary states as a mode of knowledge that goes beyond the national base and gives expression to “supranational and transnational yearnings.”<sup>5</sup> The desire to return to these sites of transition exemplifies just such a transnational yearning. A tour group leaving Pulau Bidong for the Malaysian mainland waves a Vietnamese flag.<sup>6</sup> The news article does not specify, but it seems highly unlikely that these Vietnamese-in-exile would wave the officially recognized flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. They must be upholding the flag of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), which is now consigned to history and the imaginary. Overseas Vietnamese have a stake in what is now an imagined Vietnamese state. It is perhaps in this sense that their return trips have a political dimension, but it is a politics of the imaginary—a reconstitution of the ideals that impelled them to struggle for freedom. In this fantasy those ideals are retained in an imaginary state of Vietnam.

Given the historically constructed instability of the identities of Vietnamese refugees as a result of colonialism and war, reunion trips may work toward re-affirming and consolidating multiple identities. Memorialization is one mechanism by which this is accomplished. Those who have suffered a violent death oblige the living to commemorate the dead. The work that war memorials do, as Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, “compensates for lost lives so as to render survival meaningful.”<sup>7</sup> Honoring the dead is a form of repayment for survival. As to why he made a pilgrimage back to the



island of his temporary captivity, Andrew Doan responds: “Two years ago I saw a film about Bidong which made me want to go back and pray for the spirits of those who didn’t survive.”<sup>8</sup> The modest, hand-made monuments that are now in ruins on Pulau Bidong bear some similarity to the state-sponsored memorials Koselleck describes: “In addition to remembrance, the question of the justification of this death is also evoked. Here, factors of arbitrariness, freedom, and voluntariness, as well as factors of coercion and violence, come into play.... [S]uch deaths stand in need of legitimation and obviously are, therefore, especially worthy of remembrance.”<sup>9</sup> Not only the plaques, grave stones and shrines bearing the names of the dead but also the return visits to former refugee camps can be seen as performative memorials.

An Australian documentary, *Return of the Boat People*, reports that former refugees return to their former camps to remind themselves of what freedom had cost them.<sup>10</sup> These Vietnamese tourists re-encounter their past sufferings to renew their appreciation for their current lives of comfort. They visit these sites of memorialization because, as Marita Sturken states, “a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values.”<sup>11</sup> These values are collectively referred to as “freedom.” Because, as Koselleck claims, the dead cannot be redeemed, the ritual memorialization of the dead is a means of re-confirming to the survivors the mutual cause for which some paid in death and others in suffering. “The cost of freedom is so high,” bemoans Thuong Thi Nguyen, who in 2003 had been interned in a camp in the Philippines for fourteen years. “The thought of freedom is what helped me overcome the pain,” she continues.<sup>12</sup>

Former refugees who narrate their experience through websites and blogs tend to express themselves toward the future in recounting the past. The prospect of a new life is activated by a return to the past. Revisiting

the sites of their camps is a means of re-energizing hopes for the future and validating the struggle for freedom. On vn-refugeecamp.com, a website designed, in its own words, “for Vietnamese refugees,” the banner reads: “Pulau Besar, Vietnamese refugee camp, an island of hope and freedom, where new life begins...”<sup>13</sup> Freedom is experienced as gratitude for having been chosen not only to survive but to gain entry into the then so-called “Free World.” Cold War distinctions linger as privileges of the “First World,” equated with the “Free World,” are contrasted with the misfortunes and underdevelopment of the “Third World.”

To whom do these sites belong? To those who lived, worked, and suffered there, to those who legally own and govern them, to those whose financial security is dependent on them? Tourist companies are compelled to devise methods for resolving these tensions. Their task is to draw visitors. As an industry of modernization in developing countries, tourism typically promotes nationalism. According to Melissa Aronczyk, the nation manifests cultural affiliation and social cohesion through the symbolic shaping and reshaping of identities.<sup>14</sup> Through their promotions and packaging of the “best” the nation has to offer, tour companies actively produce the national identity on the symbolic register. In regard to former refugee sites, Malaysian tourist companies tend to employ non-political language, producing discourses that tap into the nation’s natural beauty, history, heritage, and humanitarianism. Ping Anchorage Tours and Travel classifies trips to islands that served as refuge to the Vietnamese (note the use of the euphemistic “refuge” as opposed to the negative connotations associated with “refugee camp”) as heritage tours marketable to Westerners who come for the beautiful scenery but whose curiosity can be peaked by the “interesting history” of the locale. The tour company explains: “We will try to sell it as a package, for no one will fly in here just to see Bidong.

We’ll probably have to throw in Kuala Lumpur and Kuala Terengganu tours to complement the package.”<sup>15</sup> Ping Anchorage categorizes the tours as “off the beaten path,” a lure and challenge for travelers who take pride in distinguishing themselves from the ordinary crowd of tourists. But local Malaysians are not particularly interested in visiting an island that was restricted for over a decade. The tour promoter adds: “Given that Malaysians are not heritage-conscious, we have to sell the colourful fishes as well.”<sup>16</sup>

PerhentianPackage.com is another travel agency that has a nature attraction tour to Bidong Island, the “forgotten isle.”<sup>17</sup> More forthright, it states explicitly that Bidong is famous for being a “Vietnamese Refugees Camp” as well as a paradise for game fishing. Heritage is mobilized in different ways for local interests as well as government initiatives. In 2006 the Malaysian government allocated between RM 5 and 8 million to turning Bidong Island into a recreational tourist attraction with a restored camp, temple, church, and museum.<sup>18</sup> As of 2010, much of that promise had not materialized, although the island now sustains a maritime research center through the Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. Ping Anchorage managing director Alex Lee remarked that the apathy was “akin to killing the goose that lays the golden egg as about 500 to 1000 Vietnamese visit the island every year...There are more than 3 million Vietnamese boat people around the world and it’s a good market to tap into.”<sup>19</sup>

A politics of aesthetics, as formulated by Rancière, concerns the ability to take part in the political sphere and to “take charge of what is common to the community.”<sup>20</sup> His notion of an aesthetic regime references the ancient Greek meaning of “aesthetics” as embodied sensory experience, that which is perceptible by feeling. This conception of aesthetics addresses the sensorium in which one lives and experiences the narrative of one’s life

and history, one’s perceptual relation to space and temporality. Aesthetics can be applied to the cultural sphere at large and to the status of what is visible and invisible within perceptual reality. Within a history of suffering and geo-political strife, and the present tumult between development and preservation, it is possible to situate the performative practice of returning to memory sites as a politics of aesthetics.

In the mid-1990s the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began a program to phase out Vietnamese refugee acceptance and assistance, no longer designating those escaping Vietnam as “political refugees” but as “economic migrants.” Without refugee status, economic migrants are ineligible for asylum, and are thus caught in a stateless limbo, poignantly described by Hannah Arendt at the close of World War II. In 2008, the “Freedom at Last” program, initiated in Canada and co-sponsored by the U.S. Vietnamese Overseas Initiative for Conscience Empowerment (VOICE) program, succeeded in removing the last Vietnamese stranded in the Philippines, or at least the last that could be located.<sup>21</sup> Beyond relieving the unfortunate victims of this indeterminate status, “Freedom at Last” was likely instituted because the stateless threaten “time-honored and necessary distinctions between nationals and foreigners.”<sup>22</sup> Arendt articulates the deep fear that political life has when difference sneaks out of the private into the public sphere. According to Arendt, only laws that guarantee rights to citizens can ensure that humans can retain their differentiation and be free. However, this solution is dependent on the nation, which Arendt concludes is problematic because if a nation is dissolved, people



are left entirely vulnerable with nothing to cling to but their bare lives. This condition of vulnerability, a reduction to nothing but bare life, as Giorgio Agamben has proposed, is exemplified in the contemporary camp.<sup>23</sup>

While Vietnamese pilgrimages to historic refugee camps underscore national narratives of freedom, they also present possible reconfigurations of identity. Tapping into a nostalgia for a past moment during which the horizon of the future appeared hopeful, they re-activate such hopes in the present. How to read the tours remains an open question depending on, to echo David Scott’s inquiry, what the past is being called upon to illuminate and how the present is thus positioned in regard to the future.<sup>24</sup> “Ngay mai em đi” (“Tomorrow I leave”) is a line from a famous and beloved Vietnamese song that was customarily heard over the intercom when an internee was discharged from a refugee camp, either to resettle in the West or to be repatriated. It is a song of both hope and mourning, and speaks to the conflictual feelings that are called upon when one stands at the “horizon of expectation” facing an emotional and temporal junction.<sup>25</sup> This is a horizon to which the tours ritually return. To engage with such a site of transition can mean to activate an aesthetic politics toward a history-in-the-making.

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8 Wilmoth, “Come hell or high water.”

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10 *Return of the Boat People*. Journeyman Pictures, ABC Australia, 2008.

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25 Ibid., 31.

## Tuan Mami

