

Mobility and Making 'Tin Lanh' in America

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Abstract

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This thesis traces the dynamics of community and place-making for Vietnamese Protestants, and introduces a different interpretive framework for this using the language of mobility. It argues that mobility has been central to the placemaking practices of Vietnamese American Protestants from the arrival of the first border crossers in 1975 to now. This research combines archival as well as ethnographic research methods with the aim of exploring what types of mobility are important for Vietnamese Protestants in different contexts, scales, and times. For Vietnamese Protestant refugees coming to the United States in the wake of the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, the debates over the shape and purposes of their churches formed the discursive landscape in which the connections and entanglement between refugee politics of gratitude and indebtedness, Christian rhetorics of spiritual brotherhood, and articulations of exilic belonging and desires of an eventual return to the Vietnamese homeland, were revealed. In this context, the major type of mobility that had to be confronted was that of refugee passage, but

present day border crossings from Vietnam to the United States carry a different set of political and spiritual impositions. These border crossings instead allow us to see the ways that mobility can become linked to ideas of modernity not through notions of material development or progress, but as the first step, an alternative to conversion, in which the act of migrating is the precondition through which one gains access towards the possibility of individual self-transformation through spirituality. Finally, drawing from archival material on the Vietnamese Boat People Evangelical Church that existed in Hong Kong, this thesis argues that mobility works not just by revealing or encoding narratives about or into places and bodies, but demonstrates the ways in which spaces of worship needed to confront the mobilities that brought people to the church as well as the border crossings that were still to come.

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List of Acronyms

ASVN: Associated State of Viet Nam

CMA: Christian and Missionary Alliance

DIF: Damascus International Fellowship

DRVN: Democratic Republic of Viet Nam

ECVN: Evangelical Church of Viet Nam

OVEC: Overseas Vietnamese Evangelical Church

PAVN: People's Army of Viet Nam

PRPC: Philippines Refugee Processing Center

RVN: Republic of Viet Nam

VBPEC: Vietnamese Boat People Evangelical Church of Hong Kong

VCOH: Vietnamese Church of Hope

Introduction: Refuge/Return: The Making of Vietnamese Protestant Mobilities

Around the time that I was finishing with my research, the Boeing machinists strike began. For my closest informant, the strike had caused a mixture of anxiety and boredom, but had also elevated long-harbored frustrations. When this person revealed their frustrations to me, what had interested me was where he had located the source of their discontent. This informant had been working at Boeing since 2013, and while they were nominally supportive of the strike and the benefits they would derive from it, he had long disapproved of what his fellow coworkers, and questioned whether their output was truly deserving of what eventually became a 38 percent pay-raise over the course of four years. This did not make him unsympathetic towards the strike, but it was obvious that his priority was to go back to work as soon as possible rather than negotiate for the best deal they could. But it became apparent where his limit was after the machinist union did not reach the majority vote needed to accept the second-to-last offer from Boeing, one that he believed was more than fair.

As part of my research for this project on Vietnamese Protestants and their connections to the Vietnam War, I conducted a set of ten interviews from July to October of 2024. Four of my ten respondents worked as machinists in the Boeing factories in Renton and Everett, and while my interviews with them had concluded before the strike began, its effects were evident in personal conversations with me as well as their conduct during Sunday services at the church they attended and where I had been doing my ethnographic observations. An atmosphere of anxiety pervaded when families were suddenly without a source of income for a period of time they hoped would only last until the end of December, and for weeks it was a constant issue brought up in prayer.

But I am not writing about Vietnamese-American labor or the politics of this strike. Instead, I offer this anecdote because in it one finds the threads of several themes that animate my project. When viewed in an assimilationist discourse, the people I discuss in this study could be interpreted as quintessential examples of the integrated refugee/migrant subject. Most of my respondents were middle to upper-middle class and made close to six figures at Boeing or as business owners. All of them were devout Protestants, and attributed much of their success and good fortune to their relationship with God, a fact that would not have been possible for many of my respondents had they not been introduced to the religion, either by Protestant missionaries in the refugee camps or by their sponsors, many of whom were Christians spurred to action in the 1970s and 80s. And while the relation between Vietnamese labor to American militarism does not take center stage in this work, it hints at one of the questions I found myself constantly referring back to: how do I build off the body of work done by the many scholars on Southeast Asian refugees and the diaspora that complicate narratives in which the refugee figure is saved by the benevolence of the United States, when my focus is on people that not only fit that image, but have ostensibly embraced their rescue and salvation by the United States and its majority religion?

This thesis traces the ways that Vietnamese Protestants have sought to construct spaces of community and belonging in the contexts of refuge and diaspora through their faith. I specifically think about the significance of the church, both as a real geographic location and as an imagined community that is both informed by and facilitates various forms of mobility. I refer to mobilities broadly rather than labelling any more specific type of movement across territorial borders, such as immigration, refuge, or asylum-seeking, because I am interested in thinking through the church as a space of entanglement. Rather than reducing all forms of movement into

one broad category, I am interested in the ways in which churches are not solely places of worship, but “sites of sociability and memory where practitioners make sense of their place in history” (Truitt 2021, 5). Vietnamese migrants work within intersecting discourses of race, modernity, faith and freedom in their attempts to cultivate community and convert other Vietnamese. I also use mobility, which I understand in this project as not only the practice or imposition of displacement of people across and through geographic space, but also the ways that these displacements are given meaning and how they operate within specific discourses, to uncover the ways Vietnamese Americans create senses of belonging by crossing borders, and in doing so do not fit within the subject-forming rubrics of the American or Vietnamese nation-state. As Fortier states, “the pathologization of the 'immigrant condition' emerges out of the power attributed to the norms of the nation state: modern definitions of the nation establish that all ethnic groups must be mobilized to create a territorial state, thus making the nation state the last stage in the 'natural' development of peoples” (Fortier 2000). Vietnamese Protestants living in diaspora do not just rely on logics of ‘home’ and ‘host’ country, but belong to a transcendental community that must also be contended with in any discussion of religious placemaking.

I use mobilities to refer to the myriad ways that Vietnamese Protestants move at different times and scales, and the ways those movements are made significant and given meaning. Cresswell understands mobility as the “dynamic equivalent of place,” meaning that it needs to be understood as a spatial phenomenon that people attach significance to (Cresswell 2012, 3). One way this can be seen is in Vietnamese border crossers’ changing political and social classifications as refugees to immigrants over time, which indicate different levels of agency and need. One sees the need to make sense of mobility in many diasporic populations, especially in

questions of how to connect their past experiences with the lands they left with their new homes. For Vietnamese Protestants, mobility has not only been a marker of precarity and source of trouble, but has also been a way that they exercise agency in building communities that defy expectations of fixity and stasis that form the basis of national and ethnic membership and belonging, as well as a catalyst for spiritual self transformation. My aim is to understand the relationship between place-making and mobility as entangled processes through which Vietnamese Protestants make sense of their lives and memories and engage in debates over what it means to be modern.

Ideas of self-sufficiency and freedom help to form just one particular narrative of modernity that Vietnamese Protestants encounter and engage with. While these particular ideas become salient when thinking about Vietnamese Protestants as refugees, and thus subjects that must be assimilated or made governable, they must also engage with modernity in terms of their evangelical faith in what Webb Keane calls a “moral narrative of modernity” (Keane 2007). In this narrative, Christian conversion entails the enforcement of boundaries and the proper delineation of subjects from objects, or identifying what things have agency. This becomes a contentious issue in the context of Vietnamese ritual and spiritual practice ancestor worship is prominent. Narratives of modernity and progress do not just work to distinguish Vietnamese Protestants from their coethnics who they aspire to convert, but are further complicated when migration is added and further distinctions are made between being a Protestant in Vietnam compared to the United States. Vietnamese Protestant mobilities therefore show us how modernity not only works discursively, but how meaning gets mapped onto real geographic locations.

This project looks at the history of Vietnamese Protestants and the variegated ways that they perform and encounter mobility in the context of place-making. In particular, I look at two distinct locales, both varying in temporal and geographic scope in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what different mobilities come into play and how that changes over time. First, I focus on the founding of the Vietnamese Protestant church in the United States from 1975 until the late 1980s, relying heavily on archival research I conducted in July of 2024. Then, I look closely at the Vietnamese Church of Hope (VCOH), a small Vietnamese Evangelical church based in South Seattle. For this part, I relied on ethnographic methods of participant observation that I did from January 2024 until September of 2024, and the previously mentioned set of ten interviews conducted with members of that congregation.

I am interested in thinking about mobility not just as events in which people travel across space, but which fundamentally alters and changes places as well. Through this project, I address questions about the relationship between mobility and place-making as it centers around Vietnamese Protestant churches, like what mobilities, including but not limited to that of refugee passage, are responsible for shaping the roles and objectives of Vietnamese American congregations? How has the performance of Vietnamese Protestant mobilities changed from the 1970s and 1980s to now, and what can this tell us about the motivations and driving narratives of those responsible for building up and sustaining Vietnamese Protestant communities? What social and political forces are at play in the formation of Vietnamese Protestant individual and group subjectivities, and where does the Vietnam War and its afterlife still play a role, if at all?

Literature Review

This thesis is an interdisciplinary project that engages with literature from Vietnamese American studies, religious studies, and geography as it relates to placemaking and mobility.

With very few exceptions, geographers have rarely engaged in studies of Vietnamese American populations, even as Vietnamese American studies scholars are interested in explicitly geographical themes such as diaspora and placemaking (Lam 2021). My approach to bridging this disciplinary gap is to focus on the ways that mobility emerges throughout the lives of Vietnamese American Protestants, and in doing so, argue that their mobilities have been and continue to be a structuring force in shaping community identities. This decision to focus on mobilities broadly comes from a desire to understand the role of the Vietnam War and its afterlife in communities that can directly trace their inceptions to it. The War is an event at the center, but it is not *the* center. It is an event that catalyzed a mobility I am interested in, but it is not the only thing responsible for all of the mobilities I understand to be central to the community building and placemaking process of Vietnamese American Protestants. Thus, the language of mobility allows us to understand the effects and afterlife of the War as part of an assemblage or entanglement of forces, the exact composition of which necessarily changes with time, that act upon Vietnamese Americans and which they must confront in order to understand their histories and futures.

I situate my work within the fields of Asian American religious studies and Vietnamese American studies, and offer this piece as a way to draw new connections between these fields based on how they address mobility and placemaking. I am interested in the ways that Vietnamese American studies engage with the implications of and ways that being labeled as refugees becomes a crucial part of building lives in a new home. I also use this project to explore the boundaries of this work, and to think about the ways that Vietnamese Protestants as a subsection of the broader Vietnamese American community have tried to mold their lives outside of their ‘refugee-ness’, however incomplete that separation may be. For this reason, I rely on

work done in American American religious studies to expand my focus beyond refugees and memories of war and refuge, and to think about migration, race, and placemaking in general. This decision is informed by the fact that at the present moment and in the context of the specific community I'm interested in, it would be disingenuous to say that all Vietnamese in America are here directly because of the war, or were refugees at some point in their journey. Many have come to the States as the result of family reunification efforts, while others came as students. Whatever the particulars, they all found themselves in the same church, working together with refugees to try to sustain a community united first by faith, then by ethnicity and language. As Rebecca Hamlin has noted, the dichotomy between refugees and migrants is one filled with fraught ideological and material implications, and while these labels do have significant effects on one's opportunities, forcing ourselves to sustain the migrant/refugee binary can only do harm both to the efforts of academics and researchers to produce positive change, but more importantly to those vulnerable individuals who cross borders, however voluntary or involuntary (Hamlin 2021, 6).

While I am skeptical of any legislative attempt to differentiate between who is a refugee and who is a migrant, I do recognize that the journeys of Vietnamese Protestants are incredibly varied and dependent on their specific social, economic, and historical contexts. I use mobility as my primary analytic to “[trace] some of the processes that run through the different accounts of human mobility at different scales, and [tie] them into a single logic without negating the very important differences between them” (Cresswell 2012, 14). For this I rely on the work of human geographers and social theorists that have problematized popular and often unquestioned ways we think about space and place by foregrounding mobility.

This work also addresses an empirical gap in the literature, namely an absence of research done on Vietnamese American Protestants. In fact, there is little in the name of scholarly work about Protestantism among the Vietnamese in general, and much of that research is focused on the history of the religion before the end of the War and refugee crises (Keith 2012; Le 1972; James 1989) The work that does talk about Protestantism during the Vietnam War is decidedly U.S.-centric, and is focused on American religious responses to the War and its aftermath (Stockhausen 2021; Cameron 2021). This has resulted in a lack of understanding on how non-American Protestant adherents might have experienced the war and resettlement differently from followers of other major religions in Vietnam such as Buddhism or Catholicism. Different ecumenical structures and theological beliefs would have had dramatic effects on how Vietnamese refugees chose to built community, but there is also the question of what it means to leave a country where being a Protestant made you part of a religious minority and coming to the United States where Protestantism is undoubtedly the dominant religion, but there has no been little research done on how these dynamics manifested or changed over time.

Asian American Religion

The late twentieth century saw the proliferation of studies that looked at Vietnamese refugees within a discourse of assimilation and integration. Studies of religious participation within Vietnamese communities were often concerned with advancing the theory of segmented assimilation, rejecting some of the assumptions of the classic assimilation model which were often inspired by earlier European immigrant socioeconomic trajectories. Segmented assimilation theories acknowledge that incorporation into American society happens differently for nonwhite and non-European immigrant communities and doesn't always result in upward

mobility or full social/racial integration into the American national body (Zhou 1997). In these studies, churches, temples, and other religious spaces were seen as vital community hubs that provided Vietnamese refugees with social services and reinforced ethnic identification (Bankston and Zhou 1996, Dorais 2007). Though outwardly rejecting theories of assimilation, these studies ultimately fed into narratives that explained the successful integration of second-generation Vietnamese Americans not because they had assimilated, but precisely because their religious beliefs provided a strong sense of ethnic identification within their community, feeding into the model minority myth and ascribing success to their Otherness. In this way, studies of Vietnamese immigrant religion were firmly embedded within a discourse driven by dominant trends in the social scientific study of Asian American religion (Cao 2005, Jeung and Bellah 2005, Hirschman 2004, Min 2010, Yang and Carnes 2005).

More recently, scholars have situated their discussions of religious institutions in ways that directly respond to the model-minority myth, and are more critical of narratives that uncritically celebrated upward social mobility of Asian immigrants, stories that elided realities of economic and social precarity and the processual and contingent nature of immigrant racialization and community building (Ong 2003, Su 2017). Some have looked at the ways that the histories of seeking refuge and resilience can be used as resources for building networks of interracial, and interreligious solidarities (Tang 2011, Leong et al. 2007). Others more explicitly discuss the role of the church as an institution with social capital that can be used to acquire resources from other members of the Vietnamese diaspora on extralocal scales (Airriess et al. 2008, Vu et al. 2013). While these works have contributed much to our understanding of the limitations of the 'ethnic enclave' designation in understanding extralocal and interracial community dynamics, they demonstrate some of the same tendencies of earlier scholarship in

understanding the Church primarily as a social institution without trying to understand the ways that faith might undergird these interactions.

Other scholars have retreated from thinking about religious participation purely as a means to facilitate social integration and have begun to think about religion in more varied ways. This includes research done that aims to place Vietnamese diasporic Catholicism in its proper historical and transnational context (Hoang, 2019, 2019, 2022), as well as accounts of the issues they faced in their efforts to sustain their religious traditions within the context of liberal multiculturalism (Ninh 2014). In other instances, post-resettlement conversion can also become a point of tension between newly converted Asian immigrants and others who see Christianity as a threat to core cultural values (Ngo 2016, Chen, 2008).

But the scholarship of Vietnamese American religion is not just limited to Catholicism, and more attention is being given to other religious traditions. This includes the work that Janet Hoskins has done on the syncretic religion of Cao Dai, as well as Allison Truitt's work on Vietnamese Pure Land Buddhism in the Gulf South (Hoskins 2017, Truitt 2021). Taken together, these works not only represent a diversification of religious traditions being looked at, but a closer engagement with themes of diasporic belonging and post-War community building practices that have energized Vietnamese American studies more broadly. They also represent a shift in how religion is being treated and are beginning to take the theologies of their respective religions into account.

Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of faith based organizations in sponsoring and facilitating the resettlement of refugees from Southeast Asia, but as of yet there remains little in the way of a systematic analysis of this process or history, or an understanding of the legacies of refugee sponsorship (Stockhausen 2021). There also remains room for more

active engagement with religious studies, which has long been interested in the theological implications of globalization. Scholars of Asian American religions are increasingly coming out of religious studies and coming in with new perspectives on and approaches to ethnic, racial, and religious identity that break with the dominant theories in the social sciences (Busto 2020). This does not mean that a social science approach is no longer necessary, as sociologists and geographers of religion have provided insights into the physical practices and quotidian aspects of life that all coalesce to construct religious spaces and communities (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2015, Tse 2011). Some religious studies scholars have advocated for the ‘migrant as theologian,’ where migrations and diasporas are interpreted through the hermeneutics of the border crossers themselves (Ley and Tse 2012).

Critical Refugee Studies and the Problems of Freedom

The refugee figure that emerges out of Global North epistemes is found paradoxically at the margins of the nation-state and the global sociopolitical order, and the center as an integral component of modern statecraft and the cultivation of the national imaginary. Scholarship from the field of critical refugee studies has done much to interrogate the role of the refugee not only as it has been used in service of the nation-state, but also the ways that the refugee figure and ‘refugee-ness’ point towards imaginaries that question the viability of the state as well (Espiritu 2014). For scholars of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis, this has meant an engagement with the concept of freedom and its related discourses. Some have argued that with refuge and freedom comes an obligation of gratitude which seeks not only to make refugees governable and controllable (Ong 2003), but also implicated the refugee figure in the continuation of American imperialism (Nguyen 2012). Others have noted that for some Southeast Asian border crossers,

refuge is never found, and that coming to the United States only means a continuation of life under imperialism, even as they are used discursively to recuperate the reputation of a post-Vietnam War America (Tang 2015).

Other scholars have offered alternative interpretations that seek to understand ways that refugee and diasporic communities exercise agency in such conditions (Nguyen 2017). Attention has also moved beyond the relation of Southeast Asian refugees and American society, focusing instead on the maintenance and changing of ‘internal’ boundaries between Southeast Asian border crossers themselves, especially ones who migrate at different times (Aguilar San-Jan 2009, Su 2023).

In many ways, the Cold War and its many violent manifestations in Southeast Asia (the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese-Cambodian War, the ‘secret war’ the United States and its anticommunist allies waged in Laos that made it the most bombed country per capita in the world) have created a condition of existence for many Southeast Asians that resembles what Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe calls the ‘wake.’ In her book *In the Wake* and in the context of Black life after the end of chattel slavery, Sharpe uses the concept of the wake and ‘wake work’ to trace “the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and [to track] the ways we resist, rupture and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially” (Sharpe 2016, 13). To explain life in the wake is to understand the ways that history is never just history and continues to live on in the collective consciousness of a population that continues to be subject to an all encompassing violence, and the attempts to refuse this violence. In the context of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, one of the ways the ‘wake’ manifests is in the desire of survivors of its tragedies to memorialize that which has been lost. Geography James Tyner has noted this in his study of quotidian, non-official memorial sites in

Cambodia, as well as by anthropologist Heonik Kwon's landmark study of the ghosts of war in Vietnam (Tyner et al. 2012, Kwon 2008). This attention to the wake in Southeast Asia goes beyond the politics of memory, as the lingering physical scars of the War, in the form of unexploded ordinances and the herbicide weaponized by the United States that is now known as Agent Orange, also serve as reminders of the instrumentalization and degradation of Southeast Asian life and death (Tu 2021).

These scholars give insights into the residual and lingering effects of Cold War violence in Southeast Asia, but Y-Dang Troeung has recently extended this line of thinking to the ways that this war lives on epistemologically in the lives of refugees as well. In her monograph, Troeung uses the concept of the refugee lifeworld to explore the violence done by the refugee label while simultaneously "striv[ing] to reactivate and reanimate refugee ways of knowing and being that have been destroyed, depoliticized, and evacuated of meaning in the service of maintaining the liberal imperial status quo" (Troeung 2022, 10). This work stands out in the way that Troeung attempts to speak to visions of futurity that are necessarily conditioned by refugee experiences and all its concomitant violences, but are never limited by them. Troeung approaches refugee trauma through the language of "disability, understood as both a lived embodiment and a system of differential impairment of racialized and gendered bodies," in order to understand the mechanisms in which trauma is differentially produced, sustained, resisted, and refused (ibid., 13).

Mobility

I am interested in the generative potential of thinking with and through mobility, especially as it relates to border crossing communities such as the Vietnamese American population. Place-making so often in our spatial imaginations takes the form of consolidation or

territorialization. When thinking about border crossing communities, there is often an assumed binary or dichotomy between two base identities- that of the ‘migrant’ culture and the ‘host country’ which is reified. But by foregrounding mobility, we allow ourselves to move beyond these assumptions and towards an understanding of migration and resettlement as an encounter not between two discrete groups, but between narratives and trajectories. The language of mobility centers agency and contingency, but understands that contingency to be operating on a much grander scale than the here and now, and that it must always involve the ‘long agos and somewhere elses’ that people bring with them on their journeys. We need to take mobility not just as a verb, as a physical act of human movement expressive of some desire or response to exigency, but as a noun that lives on in discourse, memory, and history, where we then refer to those acts as diaspora, refuge, migration, or as Christian mission. As stories and as practice, mobility forces us to think in terms of process, of how things come about, and the constancy of change that can be missed after it becomes crystallized in its narrative form.

Many evangelicals believe that one of their primary spiritual missions is to ‘plant churches.’ The term was first used by Anglican missionary and American Congregationalist Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson to describe their mission philosophy that stressed the creation of self-sufficient and self-propagating indigenous churches. The planting metaphor gestures towards the necessity of relations and networks between fellow Christians, but also the importance for a church to be able to set down its roots and to be able to grow on its own. This idea of a church as something that is rooted in place affects how we believe a church must function. The meaning of ‘rootedness’ can vary depending on the person’s priorities, but the emphasis people put on the ‘unity’ or ‘stability’ of a church to its well-being is telling. This is even apparent in the preoccupation in scholars trying to understand the role of Christianity in

relation to immigration. J.H.J Han has noted the scholarly preoccupation in the social sciences to overemphasize the ways churches *facilitate* migrant experiences of assimilation into their host societies (Han 2018). Other scholars think about the ways that ethnic churches work to preserve what they see as an ‘original’ culture or come to a compromise. It is always a question of *where* one decides to set down their roots.

In order to offer an alternate explanation of the social and political function of churches, I draw from the theoretical considerations made in the field of mobility studies. Scholars studying mobility have sought to push beyond the primacy within the social sciences of space and place-making and question our assumptions about space that often go unquestioned (Massey 2009). They understand mobility to be a core feature of modern life, and some have pushed for scholars to examine how various kinds of mobilities are produced and given meaning (Cresswell 2012). Others have sought to understand mobility beyond its binary relationship with moorings and fixity, or as a discrete phenomenon that happens in a space-time equation (Merriman 2012). I draw on the theoretical insights of the field as a way to emphasize various processes of meaning-making and entanglements, but also to utilize a framework that doesn’t put mobility in a binary with place, fixity, or stasis.

The works of geographers such as Adey, Massey, and Cresswell help frame my approach towards understanding the kinds of work that mobility does, as well as the relationship between mobility and space. Up to this point I have been unspecific about the kinds of mobilities I am interested in, but that has been deliberate because rather than arguing for the importance of certain types of mobility (i.e. international migration, refuge, performance art, etc.), I am more interested in what happens when and because people move. Cresswell argues for a notion of mobility “as a thoroughly social facet of life imbued with meaning and power, [and] is composed

of elements of social time and social space,” suggesting that the importance of certain mobilities over others and the kinds of work they do can only be explained within the specific contexts in which they emerge (Cresswell 2012, 5). The migration of Vietnamese Protestants to the United States is obviously an important mobility in the story I tell, but the concept of a thoroughly social mobility allows me to look beyond this one example and to potentially see what Vietnamese life in America looks like beyond the refugee label.

Massey also allows us to see the relationship between placemaking and mobility, two spatial and temporal phenomena that seem at first glance to be diametrically opposed. Instead of ascribing fixity to place and dynamism to mobility, Massey instead argues that we need a concept of place with “no assumption of pre-given coherence, or of community or collective identity,” but that we recognize the ‘here’ of place to be “where spatial narratives meet up or form configurations, conjunctures of trajectories which have their own temporalities (so ‘now’ is as problematical as ‘here’)” (Massey 2005, 140). In this schema that focuses on the processual nature of things and understands everything to be contingent, mobilities are just some of the many trajectories that necessarily alter the spaces in which people are coming or going from.

Methods

For this project I relied mainly on archival evidence and interviews to collect my information, with some ethnography as well. My archival evidence came from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) archives that was located in Colorado Springs, but has since relocated to Reynoldsburg, Ohio. Upon my arrival, the lead archivist explained the materials that I would find relevant were from the 1960s onward, the number of which gradually tapered off closer to the 2000s and 2010s. When I asked about this, they explained that the lack of

contemporary records was a result of the digital age, with most correspondence now happening electronically, which made it more difficult to ask for records. This was a minor setback, and forced me to change my research objectives as I initially intended to draw a comprehensive arc connecting the present to the past. What I did find at the archive, however, was enough to occupy me fully during my eight days there. The materials included correspondence between CMA officials, annual reports from the Vietnamese CMA district for most of the 1980s and some of the 1990s, transcripts of telephone conversations, fact sheets, memorandums, and a variety of anecdotes and testimonies in written form.

I used these documents to gain an understanding of the relationship between leaders of the Vietnamese Protestant community and CMA officials, seeing where their visions for the Vietnamese church in America aligned and where they might have diverged. The nature of this particular archive meant there were not a lot of materials that give insight into how the Vietnamese Protestants scattered across the country related to each other, so that the voices of the Vietnamese leaders in these documents should be read as the Vietnamese expressing their real concerns and beliefs within a representational strategy and mode of conduct they believed was most appropriate in discussions with people they saw both as equals in their religious faith, but were also their benefactors.

I also rely on a set of ten semi-structured interviews I conducted with members of the VCOH. Around half of those I interviewed held positions in the church leadership, while four were conducted with church members who did not, but attended almost every service, and one with the son of the former head pastor. Two were not ethnic Vietnamese (Korean-American and Laotian), and were also the only ones who had not been with the church since its inception. Interviewees were given the option to conduct the interview in English or in Vietnamese with the

help of a translator, but only one interview was conducted in Vietnamese. Five interviewees had come to the United States as a refugee, while three had come either through family reunification or had come as foreign international students, and two had been born in the United States. I use the real names of the interviewees when discussing their insights and who gave me permission, and use pseudonyms otherwise. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes to an hour and a half, and I asked my interviewees about their religious and migration histories, how they came to Christianity, what conversion or simply growing up Protestant in their life was and how that affected the way others saw them, as well as their reasons for coming to the United States and the VCOH. This was also supplemented by ethnographic work, mostly in the form of attending Sunday services and listening to the sermons of the various guest pastors that passed through, listening for the ways that religious leaders might interpret the Vietnamese refugee experience through an Evangelical lens. Over the course of my research, I realized that I had stumbled upon an unexpected but nonetheless invaluable ethnographic locale; my car rides with Thom Tran, the church secretary who would pick me up on Sundays to go to the VCOH and usually drop me off as well. It was something that he had volunteered to do almost from the moment I had come to Seattle, and it was during these car rides where Thom would share news from the church that I might otherwise have missed and volunteer information about himself that we did not get to discuss in church or my interview with him. It is also in these car rides where I would get glimpses into the ambivalence that even devout Vietnamese Protestants had on how their religious belief might contradict what they saw as key parts of Vietnamese culture.

I note that my general lack of Vietnamese language comprehension will have had an effect on the type of materials I had access to and most likely impacted my research questions and findings in more ways than I will ever know. I was limited to English language sources, and

while I never had aims of creating a complete and totally comprehensive portrait of Vietnamese Protestant history, this is still an obvious gap. Second, and what I believe to have been more important, was how this affected the pool of possible interviewees. When I first made my interest in the project known to Thom, he had offered to make an announcement in the church for the interviews, making sure to both translate some of the questions and topics I was interested in, as well as adding a disclaimer that though my project was about the church, it was in no way affiliated or sponsored by the VCOH or any other Vietnamese church in the area. I agreed, and while I believe this was helpful in getting interviews, there is a part of me that wonders if this or any other form of outreach was ever going to reach everyone I wanted it to reach, particularly older Vietnamese people who may not have total confidence in their English. It is one thing for a newcomer to the church to come in and after a few months of attending, say that he wants to probe their life stories, and even if they were receptive to the idea, there might be reticence stemming from the fact that they would not be able to convey their feelings and stories to me the way they would want to be understood.

This issue of language and translation was one of the many things I had to consider as I thought about my positionality. Part of the reason I became interested in this project was because I had been raised in a Vietnamese Protestant church not unlike the ones in this study. It was this sense of familiarity that became the spark for a number of questions about how these religious spaces came about and what common histories had connected the VCOH to the church of my youth, and potentially hundreds of others in the diaspora. I felt a sense of ease in thinking about these connections that was complemented by the courteousness and graciousness various members of the church welcomed me with. At the same time, there was a necessary distance owing to the fact that despite being raised in the church by devoutly religious parents, I myself

have not been devout, or even particularly religious for a long time. This does not mean that I do not take their theology seriously, for one has to if they are to make sense of the entanglements and motivations of any religious group, but is to note the awkwardness that comes with immersing oneself in an environment where proselytization is a core objective of a group. Part of my reasons for leaving Christianity in my own personal life were political, and to re-enter a decidedly theologically and politically conservative space did not make for an entirely comfortable experience. And while there were certainly instances where people would volunteer viewpoints that I saw as problematic, there were also moments of genuine, if not completely intentional, rapprochement, as evidenced in the introductory anecdote. As J.H.J Han noted in her reflections on research on Korean-American evangelicals, “[i]t is precisely the tension in-between [familiarity and distance] that has the potential to generate most revealing insights about the complex social worlds that we all inhabit” (Han 2010, 4).

Familiarity in this context also translates to a feeling of mundanity and ordinariness. Though I discussed the political discomforts that came with engaging in this church space, the reality is that the VCOH and many members of it do not see their mission as overtly political, and seemed averse to having at-length discussions on politics. This does not mean that they never made their ideologies visible, implicitly or explicitly, but their focus was on spiritual matters, with the routines and rituals of the typical Sunday service always being the top priority. I agree with Webb Keane in his discussion on Sumbanese Reformed Christians when he says “the seeming ordinariness of the Reformed Churches may help us see that quality of everydayness in which religion can have some of its most important consequences” (Keane 2007, 45). It is the fact that certain things become ordinary, whether it is the way that Sunday services go, or the

almost unanimity of shared goals and motivations for their church, and that they go unquestioned that makes them worthy of inquiry.

Chapter Overview

I take two locales of different scales to understand how mobilities and place-making practices of Vietnamese Protestants have changed over time. The first chapter offers a historical overview of Protestantism in Vietnam from its arrival until the Fall of Saigon in 1975, tracing the ways that the particular brand of Christianity offered to Vietnamese by the CMA was distinctly political and anticommunist, despite all claims to the contrary. I follow by looking at those responsible for establishing the first Vietnamese Protestant churches in the United States after the fall of Saigon. Although there were certainly some Vietnamese who were converted by evangelical missionaries during their stays in the camps and others who were converted through their Christian sponsors, the major players in this endeavor had been Protestants long before they ever left Vietnam. For them, building a church community was not just a matter of creating a place where they could worship in a familiar language, but also meant negotiating their place in the diaspora. They did not see themselves as establishing an entirely new church, but as reassembling the pieces of a church that had been broken once by the war, and again after adherents had been scattered across America. They were aided by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), an evangelical denomination largely responsible for introducing Protestantism to Vietnam and establishing the country's first Protestant church. For many church leaders, working with the CMA was a straightforward choice, but others saw a tension between their desire to rebuild the Vietnamese church against becoming one in a growing number of 'ethnic' churches.

The CMA in this context also acts as an organization that, though not directly affiliated with the state, becomes one of the major ways that Vietnamese Protestant refugees become exposed to technologies of governmentality. In their attempts to build a church, Vietnamese Protestants are also exposed to techniques that attempt to mold them into self-regulating, governable subjects. But these discussions must also be discussed in the context of freedom, and more specifically as a freedom that is given by the United States to refugees that allows them to become self-governing subjects. This comes with an expectation that they then demonstrate their gratitude by forgetting their experiences of the war. In this chapter, the mobility I look at is the international migration and journey of refuge that many Protestants took from Vietnam to the refugee camps, and finally to the United States. Moving from one country to another also came with a question of the identity of their churches; were they also transporting the Vietnamese Protestant church with them, was this a migration that would also entail building a new version of Vietnamese Protestantism?

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on one church, the Vietnamese Church of Hope (VCOH), located in South Seattle. The church was founded in 2012 by Pastor Pham Van Phuong after he had left his previous church due to disagreements with the head pastor. The VCOH shares its building with the Damascus International Fellowship of Seattle. In its almost thirteen years of existence, it has seen an ebb and flow of church membership, which peaked before 2020 and dropped off massively because of the pandemic. Although the church eventually stabilized, it would not be long before more trouble followed, and the VCOH saw its head pastor leave four years later to California in order to focus on building up a new denomination that he founded called OVEC, or the Overseas Vietnamese Evangelical Church.

The composition of the VCOH congregation is a testament to the fact that migration from Vietnam to the United States has expanded to include people coming for reasons other than refuge or asylum. There are elders who have vivid memories of living in times of war, but the majority of the congregation were either children growing up at the tail end of the war or were born after. Their stories of how they came to the faith are also different; while a considerable number of Vietnamese first encountered Protestantism either in their stays at the refugee camps or because of their sponsors, there are also many younger Vietnamese at the church who grew up long after the war ended and were raised in the faith. Because of this, it is not conversion that becomes a central issue, but their different stories of mobility and immobility that allows us to see the ways that religious belief becomes entangled in discourses of freedom, gratitude, and modernity. I trace the ways mobility is not only constitutive of the church, but continued movement away from the church is viewed as a threat to goals of unity and growth. The mobilities I highlight in Chapter 2 include migration from Vietnam to the United States, which carries a whole new set of connotations and implications than it did in the 1970s and 1980s, but also the smaller scale movements of people leaving churches to either join another one or to build a new church altogether.

Finally, I end with a discussion on the role of mobility in the lives and histories of Vietnamese Protestants in the Vietnamese Boat People Evangelical Church in Kowloon, Hong Kong. I examine the ways that mobility can be a key factor in reconfiguring not only the purpose of a church, but the ways that Vietnamese Protestants hope to achieve individual self-transformation.

Chapter 1: ‘Tin Lanh’ In Exile: Memory, Patronage, and the (re)-Making of a Church

This chapter explores the years immediately following the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and the work that the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) and the earliest Vietnamese refugees did in order to try to make sense of their situation and build a church in the United States. By tracing their mobilities, we see the ways that Vietnamese Christians interacted with various aspects of the Christian humanitarian complex that helped define Southeast Asian refugee resettlement. In naming the Christian humanitarian complex, I am referring to the assemblage of international relief workers and institutions active in the refugee camps that were explicitly motivated by a compassion and humanitarianism founded on Christian religious ethics. This is not to say that they were at all separable from the “interactive set of processes within, among, and transcending states that produce immobility and movement related to violence and persecution” that Rawan Arar and David FitzGerald call the refugee system, but is to delineate a specific ideology and discourse that I am interested in understanding in relation to both the refugees themselves and the state (Arar and FitzGerald 2022, 6). In their journeys we see the ways that refugee experiences became co-opted in a narrative that allowed the United States to recuperate its image, and the different ways in which they encounter and become subjects of the ideals of American liberalism through the effects of state and religious humanitarianism.

These encounters did not end once the Vietnamese left the refugee camps, spaces either within Asia under various governmental control or that had been otherwise reappropriated by the United States military in order to house border crossers so that they could be screened for

resettlement or repatriation. The politics of gratitude and forgetting became more pronounced and complex as the Vietnamese tried to rebuild their lives and their church in a new country. They confronted unfamiliar, but not entirely new structures of race that at once labelled them both as refugees and targets for humanitarian intervention, as well as racial minorities that needed to be incorporated into a model of multiculturalism that allowed them to shape their congregational practices in their own ways, as long as they didn't threaten the larger objectives of the CMA. Vietnamese diasporic Christians, of course, had their own projects and motivations, and part of their story involved negotiating their own goals and desires with the ones imposed upon them as refugees. The church in this story becomes a space of negotiation between the politics of assimilation and gratitude, characterized by the politics of forgetting and the universalizing tendencies of American evangelicalism, and diasporic desires.

In this chapter, I look at the CMA's refugee sponsorship and resettlement program which they called Operation Heartbeat, as one of the key programs that makes these transnational connections between Christian activity in Vietnam, the United States, and the refugee camps explicit. These efforts also show the fuzzy boundaries between secular humanitarian motives that characterized state approaches to immigrant assimilation and membership in a religious membership, which, especially in Protestant Christianity emerge rhetorically as an egalitarian 'brotherhood,' but also works to elide a racial hierarchy that does not sustain itself through violence, but through a form of humanitarian intervention best described as material and spiritual paternalism. In doing so, I intervene in the literature on Vietnamese refugee resettlement by offering an alternative space (the church) outside of the urban ethnic enclave where community building occurs. Scholars such as Karin Aguilar-San Juan and Phuong Tran Nguyen have offered incredibly insightful looks into the racial and political dynamics at play in the formation of

Vietnamese American neighborhoods such as Little Saigon in California, but there have been comparatively fewer studies that focus specifically on the ways that religious spaces replicate or augment expressions of refugee gratitude and agency (Aguilar 2009, Nguyen 2017).

Additionally, I intervene conceptually by arguing that scholars of the diaspora should take seriously the idea of continuity between the various stages of refugee passage (from Vietnam to the refugee camps to the United States). In this chapter, I try to recognize the ways in which the refugee camps are not merely transitional stages, but are sites of memory making and subject formation that actively inform Vietnamese refugee politics in the United States.

The evangelical strand of Christianity endorsed by the CMA is not the same as the ascetic Christianities analyzed by Max Weber in his detailing of the Protestant ethic and its influence on the social effects of capitalism. However, elements of the CMA's philosophy towards missions and evangelism make it an institution that promotes the moral transformation of the refugee into a subject amenable to the pursuits of an individualist, entrepreneurial capitalist liberal society like that of the U.S. Like many evangelical denominations in the Euroamerican world during the late 19th century, the CMA was heavily inspired by the mission philosophies of American minister and clergyman Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson and their 'indigenous church' policy, in which a missionary would proselytize and convert a sufficient Christian body in a previously 'neglected' region, but would leave the actual establishment and administration of the church to the converts. Venn and Anderson also believed that for these indigenous churches to be successful, they needed to be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating (Le 1972, 122). In a way, building a church was also an exercise for cultivating those skills and values that could be translated into a moral foundation for entrepreneurial activity in a capitalist economy; a successful church would be able to accumulate its own wealth in the form of new followers and

converts, while the churches that were unable to support themselves or find followers were not to be part of the elect. And while it would be too far to imply that CMA missionaries viewed the making of churches through the lens of an expanding capitalistic enterprise, by demonstrating and emphasizing these principles in their original religious contexts, Vietnamese converts were being exposed to ideas of individualism and a kind of spiritual entrepreneurialism that helped form the moral foundations for American capitalism (Weber 1904).

The language of self-governance and self-sufficiency may have originated in evangelical missionary endeavors, but CMA officials continued to adopt that language even when discussing Vietnamese churches in the United States. Christian paternalism, whether in the form of refugee sponsorship or the advising of the building of a church, often aligned with a conservative sentiment that saw patronage and a contingent charity as an acceptable alternative to dependence on the welfare state. As Ong has noted in the context of Cambodian refugees turning to the Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the “Church offered an alternative modernity to that of secular state institutions, seeking to inculcate modern methods of discipline and situate newcomers within a sacralized global hierarchy of ethno-racial positioning and possibilities” (Ong 2003, 197). For Ong, the tension between Christian paternalistic compassion and its drive to instill values of self-reliance converges with a racial discourse which associates Protestant Christianity with whiteness (which differs from Catholicism due to the different histories of the religions in Vietnam which have resulted in Catholicism being much more identifiable as a ‘Vietnamese’ religion) and thus represents a way for Southeast Asian refugees to find avenues for upward social mobility. Structures of race are also replicated within the ecumenical structure so that even in being Protestant, Southeast Asians are still subordinate to and dependent on white American Protestants.

Implicit in the question of racial hierarchy within Protestant Christianity is the problem of culture. And while I discuss this in more depth in Chapter 2, I would like to note that it is less on an issue in the context of Vietnamese Protestants than it is in Aihwa Ong's study of Cambodians entering the LDS, or even of Hmong Protestant converts, and that is because of my methodological approach, as well as my approach to the concept of culture in general. Christianity in the study of non-European refugees is often depicted as a thing that is squarely on the 'other side,' only to be encountered once one begins their journey of refuge. While this is empirically evident for many border crossers coming from Southeast Asia, that is not the case for the actors I am looking at. The terms of Operation Heartbeat meant that the main Vietnamese actors responsible for establishing churches in the United States were already Protestant before they had even begun the process of seeking refuge, so questions of syncretism or incorporation of local Vietnamese folk traditions of spiritual beliefs do not really apply. What does become evident in the process of transition and border crossing is that 'culture' continues to be a powerful marker of racial and ethnic differentiation that materializes in the form of a 'Vietnamese' Protestantism versus an "American" Protestantism. While this narrative is important (I explore it more in Chapter 2), I am less interested in outlining what a Vietnamese-style Protestantism looks like than I am in understanding how this concept operates within discourses of refugee subjectivity and racial hierarchies, understanding that it has important consequences on the ways that Vietnamese Protestants are able to relate to white Protestants in ways both fruitful and limiting.

The appeal of Christianity cannot be reduced to an analysis of the material gains made through refugee sponsorship or the possibility for upward social mobility; one must also consider to what degree conversion also allowed border crossers to make sense of their life experiences

and their current place in the world. Scholars have noted the ways that religion can become an important way for immigrants to make sense of and reconstruct themselves out of the disorienting experience of border crossing (see Chen 2009, Levitt 2007). Tweed understands religion to be an integral part of dwelling or homemaking, which involves three interrelated processes of “mapping, building, and inhabiting” (Tweed 2009, 82). Memories and emotions are encoded into religious spaces that help orient Protestant individuals and communities in time and space, both retrospectively and prospectively. Churches not only work as markers of where they are currently, but are also reminders of the churches they had left and the multiple salvations they had been ‘given’ in their crossings. They are spaces of collective memory, and as such become strategic memory projects, in which communities “select, preserve, or generate anew memories with an eye toward their potential uses in the present” (Aguilar 2009, 64). For the earliest Vietnamese border crossers, collective memory becomes deeply politicized and forms the grounds in which they engage with different American discourses, especially ones concerning race. Tweed also notes that “individuals and groups draw on religion to negotiate collective identity” (Tweed 2009, 97). Part of what I hope to show in this chapter is the ways that religious identity and memory became resources that Vietnamese Protestants used to procure autonomy for their own community, and how attempts to do so were both hindered and encouraged within American discourses of race and refugee gratitude.

Before I begin my analysis, I begin with a brief historical overview of Protestantism in Vietnam. I do not go into too much detail on the Vietnam War or twentieth century Vietnamese history in general, but I discuss these when I believe they are relevant to the development of Protestantism. I then proceed to go into detail on the CMA policies, paying specific attention to the relationship between the missionaries and the church they helped establish and their

commitment to non-involvement in political matters. These two policies were integral to the Protestant experience in Vietnam, and I argue that when taken together, they represent an attempt at creating a new, modern religious experience in Vietnam. In other words, accepting the Protestant faith meant accepting a secularized, but not entirely secular, worldview, and a religious form of American liberal multiculturalism.

The Vietnam War and the CMA in Vietnam

For a significant amount of the first half of the 20th century, Protestantism, and especially CMA missionaries, represented one of the most significant forms of an American presence in Vietnam. Through their evangelizing and role in establishing an indigenous church, Protestant missionaries advanced their own version of modernity and the proper place of religion in society. It was during these years which saw the expansion of missionary activity and the establishment of the first Vietnamese Protestant church that we can first glean insight into the ways that religious rhetoric and attitudes that would characterize the CMA's response to the ensuing refugee crisis.

While not the focus of my essay, it is important to note that Protestant missions in Vietnam have historically found much more success in proselytizing to the ethnic minorities in the central highlands like the Hmong and Montagnards. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that some see both economic advantages in converting to Protestantism, as well as a way to become more modern and potentially alleviating some of the issues that comes with their racial marginality (Ngo et al. 2016). And while these experiences resonate with the themes I explore, I am purposefully choosing to focus on the history and experience of ethnic Vietnamese. The missionary efforts among these groups is a significant part of Protestant history

in Vietnam, but those histories and trajectories differ too significantly from Protestantism among ethnic Vietnamese for me to do them justice here. The same can be said for other Protestant denominations, the most notable being Baptists and the Mennonites. Protestantism is not a monolith, and the fact that different Protestant groups responded so differently to the Vietnam War makes it all the more important to understand why the CMA, the most influential of these denominations in Vietnam during the twentieth century, acted the way it did.

The Early History of Protestantism in Vietnam

Protestantism was first introduced to Vietnam during the French colonial period by French and British missionaries who had little to no success in proselytizing to the Vietnamese in part because of their preoccupation with meeting the demands of the European population in French Indochina. This changed when the CMA finally established the first permanent Protestant mission in Tourane (now present day Da Nang) in 1911 (Keith 2012, 145). The CMA is an American evangelical denomination established in 1897 by A.B. Simpson, and is notable for its emphasis on global missions and evangelism. Simpson expressed an interest in Southeast Asia since at least 1887, when he proclaimed that "the southeastern peninsula of Asia has been much neglected," and that "the great kingdom of Annam," would become an important mission field in the future (Le 1972, 128).

The CMA was the first Protestant mission to successfully reach the non-European population in Vietnam, and had the express objective of establishing an indigenous, self-sufficient Protestant church. The number of Protestant converts in Vietnam would never rival those of Buddhist, Catholic, or even Cao Dai (which emerged roughly around the same time) adherents, but the religion nevertheless experienced enough growth to become a major

source of anxiety for French colonial officials regarding religious politics (Keith 2012). However, these fears were more the result of the perception of Protestantism and its growth rather than any outright attempts at obtaining political power by the American missionaries or their Vietnamese converts. Regardless of their intentions, this demonstrates the fact that there existed a politically significant, if quantitatively nominal, American presence in Vietnam thirty years before the Cold War.

The CMA saw its goals during this period as being primarily spiritual, which meant focusing the bulk of its efforts on evangelism and the construction of a self-sufficient national Protestant church in Vietnam. This was partially achieved in 1927 with the establishment of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) (Le 1972, 187). But a comparison of the CMA and ECVN's proclaimed goals and principles with their actual practices reveals that at various times, the political and social context of twentieth century Vietnam meant that these organizations and their members had to act in ways that contradicted with these core principles, or at the very least were grounds for serious meditations on how their faith should outwardly manifest itself. Their efforts to win converts over were certainly not helped by the fact that the CMA rarely engaged in efforts at improving the social welfare of the people they were proselytizing to, as from the onset missionaries had refrained from establishing programs or institutions that would materially benefit the people they were proselytizing for fear of 'inducing' them to the religion under non-spiritual pretenses (King n.d.).

The CMA and the ECVN both decided to not intervene in political situations, instead emphasizing their dedication to their spiritual evangelical mission, but that did not mean they were immune to the social upheaval of the first half of the twentieth century. In his outline of the Constitution of The Evangelical Church of French Indochina, Le points to the last article of the

constitution which stipulated that "The Evangelical Church of Indochina affirms its loyalty to the government and will never harbor any movement contrary to it. It resolves not to discuss politics, or other matters outside of the purpose of this organization" (Le 182). Aside from the obvious contradiction between the two statements, any interpretation of this article needs to take into consideration the geopolitical context in Vietnam, and reveals that actually determining the governing authority was more complicated than it seemed. Not only that, but the actions and official stances of the ECVN and the CMA missionaries proved that this was not a hard and fast rule, and that it was not a matter of supporting whatever governing body had control of a specific territory, but supporting the one that was perceived to be most supportive of the Protestants' evangelising mission.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the territory that we know now as Vietnam was under French control as part of French Indochina, which also included present day Laos and Cambodia. With the French surrender to Germany in 1940, Vietnam was under the dual control of the Vichy government as well as Japan. This arrangement continued until 1945 when Japanese forces staged a coup against the remnants of the defunct Vichy regime and established their own puppet government. The new government would only last for five months until August 1945, when Japanese surrender brought an end to their imperial ambitions in Vietnam (Blatt 1991, 6). The following decade would see the emergence of two states in Vietnam that both sought to consolidate control over the territory: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN), comprised of Vietnamese communists and nationalist revolutionaries and headed by Ho Chi Minh, and the Associated State of Vietnam, an anticommunist state that was given partial sovereignty by the French, and which would later become the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), free from French control. This is not meant to give a comprehensive summary of the political developments in

mid-twentieth century Vietnam, but to demonstrate the fact that locating the governing authority that Christians were supposed to support was not a simple task. And this is certainly not meant to advance the Cold War fiction that at any point there existed a Vietnam ‘divided’ by the 17th parallel into North and South: certainly there existed two competing states, but accepting this narrative not only means ignoring the allegiances and forms of agency that complicate the binary, but also ignoring the fact that the DRVN and the ASVN/RVN, and certainly many Vietnamese citizens, understood Vietnam to be an indivisible nation (Giebel 2019).

Regardless of the specifics of Vietnamese nationalist ideology and the intent of the Geneva Accords, the church would find itself literally cleft in two along the 17th parallel. In the year after the Geneva Accords were signed, which established the 17th parallel as temporary military partition, with DRVN administering the zone north of the parallel and the ARVN administering lands to the south, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese moved from North to South, including many Protestants. Fears of religious persecution were certainly a motivating factor, but Keith offers an alternative explanation for this movement, specifically regarding Vietnamese Catholics:

As such, although spirituality clearly shaped the decisions of many Catholics to leave the DRV, other material reasons and experiences were often just as important, if not more so. Some Catholics, especially those who had direct connections to the ASV or other noncommunist nationalist movements, feared reprisals for political and military opposition to the new state. Others worried about poor economic conditions in the north, especially in light of the famine in 1944 and 1945, and many feared that DRV economic policies, especially land redistribution, would make the economic situation even worse. Some simply saw American ships as an opportunity to move to a region whose economic opportunities had long appealed to northern Vietnamese, Catholic and other (Keith 2012, 229).

Although Keith discusses this exodus specifically in the context of Catholic flight from the North, it would not be difficult to make similar claims about Protestants as well. It is also not to say that all Protestants were able to leave the north, or that some even wanted to. But those in the

church that stayed would find themselves increasingly disconnected from the Protestants in the South, and by 1975, the CMA was unable to make direct contact with any Protestant in the north, with Vietnamese pastors being only nominally more successful in their attempts (King 1975).

In 1963, the CMA wrote a letter affirming their support of the RVN and the government of Ngo Dinh Diem (James 1989, 226). They partially justified their decision by arguing that it was in line with official mission and church policy of being loyal to the government, thus implicitly supporting one vision of the Vietnamese nation they believed to be more legitimate. There are other elements to consider as well; the CMA were worried about religious persecution, and while there is certainly evidence of anti-Protestant sentiment, the Hanoi government was suspicious of Protestant missionaries because of their association with foreign, specifically American, powers. And while American evangelicals were generally supportive of US involvement in the war, this association between Protestantism and foreignness had been a source of suspicion since at least the colonial period, but gained a new sense of urgency with the Cold War, and continues to mark the current Vietnamese government's attitude towards the religion (Ngo et al. 2016, 15).

Protestantism in Vietnam today is a small, but fast growing religion that has continued to develop in interesting ways since the end of the war and one can see in the current government's history in the ways that its religious policies are closely related Vietnamese structures of race and ethnicity (Ibid 20). A majority of the Protestants in Vietnam are ethnic minorities and find themselves under higher government scrutiny for their faith than even ethnic Vietnamese Protestants, a remnant of Cold War logic that equates the religion with American, and therefore unwelcome foreign influence. Other vestiges of the Cold War remain embedded in Protestantism as well, with the fracturing of the ECVN into two entities: ECVN-North and ECVN-South.

What the CMA did through its missionary work in Vietnam in this period is important because it demonstrates their attitudes towards the Vietnamese which it would replicate in its work in the refugee camps, as well as in trying to set up churches for the Vietnamese in the United States. Although the CMA has become less involved in Vietnam with the establishment of the ECVN, its linkages are still important to this day for many Vietnamese Christians that are moving to the United States now, as it becomes the way in which they find community. And although it claimed to be focused solely on its spiritual mission, we can see how the CMA would come to identify itself explicitly in Americanist terms, replete with the same Cold War ideological underpinnings used by the state to justify its actions.

Operation Heartbeat

Mass displacement had been an ever present feature of the Vietnam War, but only became a topic of international interest in the waning years of the war and the collapse of the RVN. By the time the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the military component of the DRVN in northern Vietnam, had reached Saigon in April of 1975, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in the southern half of Vietnam had been displaced, with numbers set to increase due to fears of communist reprisals for anyone who had been associated with the United States government or the RVN (Robinson 1998, 22). The United States responded with Operation New Life, their name for the program that would be responsible for evacuating and resettling more than 100,000 Vietnamese refugees. Transportation out of Vietnam was handled almost entirely by the United States military, who by boat or aircraft would bring the refugees onto one of the refugee camps built in Guam or the Philippines, though the Philippines would subsequently refuse to accept more refugees after August 1975, even pushing away boats coming from Vietnam towards

Palawan (ibid. 23). Thus, Guam became the central staging point in the Pacific where refugees were to be processed quickly before being transferred to one of four U.S military bases: Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Indiantown Gap in Indiana, or Eglin Air Force Base in Florida (Lipman 2020, 28).

Approximately 200,000 Vietnamese would come through these camps from April 1975 to December 1975, and in the process would be constantly confronted by different parts of an international and American humanitarian complex, including a large evangelical Christian presence in the form of Faith-based organizations (FBOs) such as World Relief and the Lutheran World Federation. Their presence in the camps was gladly accepted by the United States government and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), as many of the Christians in the camps were former missionaries who knew Vietnamese and could assist in translation and interpretation in screening interviews, as well as in teaching classes that were created to prepare refugees for their new lives in the United States (Stockhausen 2021). But by far their most important task in the camps was their sponsorship programs, which most often took the form of American families or groups like churches providing financial support for the refugees upon arrival with the goal of helping them become self-sufficient.

The CMA was one such organization, and in May 1975 had officially started its sponsorship program, Operation Heartbeat. Unlike other sponsorship programs, the CMA was selective in who it chose to sponsor, prioritizing members of the ECVN and any refugees who had converted while in the camps. Although humanitarian concern was certainly a motivating factor for the program, it is also clear that CMA officials considered their spiritual ministry to be the most important aspect of their work. This is evident in the language of the weekly reports penned by CMA president Nathan Bailey, who emphasized that “Heartbeat began not with

sponsorship but with the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all refugees in every camp,” as well as the continued presence of CMA missionaries in the camps long after the CMA had stopped sponsoring refugees with the end of Operation Heartbeat in October 1975 (Bailey 1975, 4). It is also evident in the fact that the CMA, unlike other Christian organizations in the camps, never became a voluntary agency (VOLAG) contracted by the U.S. government to help with refugee resettlement. VOLAGs received funding from the State Department, but were required to be nonsectarian in who they sponsored, which was considered “Outside the scope of CMA participation - participation which directly reflects the burden that God gave us in this instance, not a burden that we assumed due to any type of contractual obligations” (ibid.). By working semi-independently, the CMA was able to advance its own vision of Christian humanitarianism that came from a separate, wholly spiritual motivation, and which manifested itself in a highly contingent and selective form of sponsorship.

The problem of finding ‘deserving’ refugees to sponsor became an increasingly important issue for the CMA in the last months of the program, further demonstrating that limits existed even for a humanitarianism based in a Christian ethic. By early September 1975, the CMA had processed almost every ECVN member in the system, and Louis Dechert, coordinator of Operation Heartbeat, was making plans to cease ministries in all four camps in the United States. Addressing the state of the camps and the CMA’s activities to the end of Operation Heartbeat, Dechert wrote:

The refugee population will per force become increasingly a higher concentration of hard(impossible) to sponsor individuals. Single men will become an increasing proportion as the more acceptable family units are sponsored. I believe the decreasing numbers of conversions and decreasing chapel attendance reflect and illustrate this changing composition of the refugee population. Unlike some of my HEARTBEAT associates, I do not believe that great increases of evangelistic enterprise will have any measurable effect on these hard cases. At any rate, with implicit or explicit sponsorship

possibilities completely removed from the proclamation, any responses to the evangelistic appeal ought to be reasonably Spirit directed. (Dechert 1975, 2-3).

The limits of the CMA's humanitarianism is a reflection of the contradictions in the logics of the humanitarian regime. Sponsorship and other forms of refugee relief aid came from the desire to extend compassion to those figures who are seen as being in the most need of protection, but only to the extent that these inflows do not pose a threat to state sovereignty (Espiritu et. al. 2022, 81). This tension emerges in those debates over what makes a border crosser 'deserving' of the gift of white salvation from the Global North (Hamlin 2021, 8). For the CMA, a marker of deservingness seemed to be whether or not they believed that refugees would be receptive to the evangelical message. As a result, there was an implied preference towards those who had already taken the first steps towards attaining the attributes of a conservative white respectability, with an acceptance of the Christian faith being a precondition for continuing their transformation to modernity and citizenship.

The primacy of the spiritual calling that undergirded the CMA's efforts in the refugee camps also meant that 'salvation' manifested not just through material aid and sponsorship, but primarily in the evangelizing mission. Though sponsorship was certainly considered a worthwhile demonstration of one's commitment to doing God's work on Earth, it was not the CMA's main priority, and in some cases the promise of sponsorship was seen as a hindrance to its 'spiritually-directed ministry.' This attitude had been prevalent among missionaries since the 19th century, when missionaries in Asia were concerned about people deciding to convert solely because they saw the church as a source of charity with such people being derogatorily termed 'rice Christians.' The CMA was clearly wary of this happening within the camps given the specific objectives of Heartbeat, but even accounts of the ones that 'slipped through the cracks'

reveal much about the CMA's priorities. In one memo to CMA officials, Dechert recounted a story of a non-Christian family that had been sponsored seemingly by mistake:

Indeed I did remember Mr. Braden and his congregation, as well as Rev. Rick Drummond, Rev. Dave Beack, Hap Cunningham and the Palermos at Chaffee we prayed together in the chapel, August 11, for wisdom in dealing with the question of whether or not to let the non-Christian family proceed to Pitman. Everyone except myself strongly felt it to be the Lord's will, by the fact that the family had been assisted by the Chaffee CMA Office only by accident, had been accidentally passed through as Christians and appeared to me to have possibly "used" the Alliance. After our prayers, Dr. Nathan Bailey's guidance to "do the right thing and trust the Lord for the results" became fresh on my spirit. We decided to let the family go to Pitman. Remember you, Mr. Braden? Indeed I do, sir, and I hope I will never forget your statement which followed: 'We sponsored one of the non-Christians, you remember; the father has become a Christian!' (Dechert 1975, 5)

Sponsorship and material support in this story were only the material means through which a greater form of salvation is realized by the refugee: that of a spiritual transformation, all seemingly compelled through an act of providence. The story of this family is not a success merely through their rescue, but through the fact that, at least through the father, the CMA's evangelising mission was complete. We will never know whether or not what the father's motivations for converting are, or whether or not his conversion was even genuine, but it highlights the performativity in refugee interaction with state and extra-state apparatus required to legitimize their very existence in their new homes. This performativity is most common within the screening process, where refugees must present a picture of their life that guarantees their chance at resettlement (Espiritu et. al. 2022, 92), but the father's conversion is the kind of act that only works in hindsight. By taking an active step towards accepting the dominant religion of the land he now occupies and demonstrating that he is capable of becoming someone 'deserving', and only when he is legible within the CMA's greater vision does he justify the decision to bestow the 'gift' of salvation given to him. The story of the accidental sponsorship resulting in conversion is not just one of a divine power winning over another follower; it is the story of a

refugee receiving the gift of salvation two times over, and thereby affirming the legitimacy of their rescue by the American humanitarian regime.

Building a Church

Operation Heartbeat had two related objectives: the first was to find members of the ECVN in the refugee camps and to facilitate their resettlement by finding sponsors within the CMA constituency, and the second was to establish churches for the Vietnamese. This was not an entirely new task for the denomination as it had been partly responsible for the creation of the ECVN, but whereas the objective of CMA missionaries in Vietnam was to create the base upon which a fully independent church could emerge, the question of independence would become a point of major contention between American CMA officials and Vietnamese Protestant leaders who preferred to continue being affiliated with the CMA, and other Vietnamese Protestants who sought to recreate the church and the independence they had once known, but this time in exile.

In line with their evangelical missionary focus, the CMA had always understood refugee resettlement to be part of a larger project of winning new converts over to Christianity, and as such approached the building of a Vietnamese church in America with great enthusiasm. Through Operation Heartbeat, the refugee camps became “launching sites for this developing church,” which it dubbed the Vietnamese Specialized Ministry, with CMA officials further emphasizing this connection by stressing that “every attempt should be made to support the [Vietnamese Specialized Ministry] through HEARTBEAT facilities, procedures, and resources” (Dechert 1975, 1). To oversee this task, the CMA appointed Reverend Truong van Tot to be the Field Director of the Vietnamese Specialized Ministry, giving him their full, unqualified support to have “as many Vietnamese churches established as are requested by the Vietnamese” (ibid.). On June 29, 1975, the first Vietnamese church in America was established in Lincoln, Nebraska,

making it the first Christian place of worship, Catholic or Protestant, to be established in the United States by the Vietnamese (Fussell 1975, 10). In an interview with a local reporter, Truong noted that contrary to the notion that this marked the beginning of a ‘new’ church, he believed that they were “‘continuing [their] work here under the sponsorship of the Alliance Church,’” going so far as to suggest that they would like to return to Vietnam at some point (ibid). Truong’s sentiments echo those that historian Tuan Hoang found among the earliest Catholic Vietnamese refugees in their cultivation of an exilic identity, affirming their belonging not only to the Vietnamese nation, but to a Vietnamese church as well. The church as a physical space then becomes loaded with conflicting and entangled meanings, a place where Vietnamese must negotiate with continued American patronage and its own implications of gratitude and rescue, ostensibly facilitating social integration for its congregation while paradoxically being inscribed by their memories, thus serving as a constant reminder of the country and life they left.

Memory for Vietnamese Protestants was certainly a source of their exilic identity and the desire to replicate the church they had known in their home country, but this was far from a consensus opinion, and many different visions existed for what a ‘church in exile’ would look like. Some desired something closer to an ethnic church still affiliated with the CMA, owing to the denomination’s historical connection to Vietnam, while others wanted to become a separate, independent evangelical denomination, but the strongest expression of exilic identity was manifest in a desire to be “‘recognized and perhaps incorporate[d] as the Tin Lanh Church of Viet Nam in exile” (Sang 1980, 1). These different visions of the church were enabled by the immense denominational diversity of American Protestantism, but were animated far more by social discourses of exilic belonging and national identification than concrete theological differences. What matters for me is less the particular aspects of each plan, but more the fact that

the identity of the church was grounded on the ways that Vietnamese Protestants made sense of what Anne-Marie Fortier calls the ‘drama of emigration’ (Fortier 2000, 114). And while the Italian Catholics that Fortier looked at understood that ‘there was no going back,’ that does not apply to Vietnamese Protestants in America in the 20th century, who had never foreclosed the possibility of return. In deciding what the future of the church was to look like, Vietnamese Protestants needed to construct meaning of their mobilities, not only on what the very acts of displacement and refugee passage meant in terms of what communities (ethnic? national? diasporic?) they were beholden to, but also in terms of their finalities, or lack thereof. In other words, by leaving open the possibility of return, of a mobility that, if not reversible, was at least possible in the other direction, Vietnamese Protestants were making claims to the importance of holding onto ethnic and national ties, and by doing so refusing to be subsumed into the American national body.

In determining how to build their church, Vietnamese Protestants were not only producing meaning out of their mobility (in the form of migration and refugee passage), but were also responding to the exigencies of their material lives. For some pastors, the question of whether or not to remain with the CMA had far less to do with their aspirations of returning to Vietnam or delineating the boundaries of their spiritual community, and more to do with pragmatic decisions of which denomination offered the most competitive salaries, and in turn would allow their churches to stay open for longer. In the summary of a 1980 meeting held in Seattle by leaders of the Vietnamese Specialized Ministry (renamed at this point to the CMA Vietnamese district), and leaders of the CMA national church to discuss the implications of a potential separation between Vietnamese Protestants and the CMA. The risks of the ideas mentioned above were discussed, but they also discussed the issue of pastors and lay members of

a congregation leaving the CMA to join other denominations (Colenso 1980, 2). The record suggests that many pastors that had left the CMA chose to do so more out of financial considerations than any doctrinal reasons, citing a belief that a larger subsidy allowed them to be “free to preach”(ibid.). By 1980, the subsidies from Operation Heartbeat dedicated to helping the development of the Vietnamese district had dried up, but as was the case for many Vietnamese refugees, they had failed to achieve economic self-sufficiency by the end of their sponsorships, leaving many Vietnamese pastors in difficult positions (Nguyen 2017, 49). To stay with the CMA meant not being able to handle the material and spiritual demands of their congregation, but leaving the CMA for another denomination made recreating their memories of unity and oneness as ‘Tin Lanh’ (‘Protestant church’ in Vietnamese) more difficult.

Building ‘Tin Lanh’ in America emerges out of this picture as a project of identity formation in which Vietnamese actors negotiated the obligations of refugee gratitude and a historically specific form of Christian charity with the CMA that at times took the form of a fraternal, semi-egalitarian bond, with their own desires for creating a distinctly Vietnamese religious community. As mentioned before, this project relied on the memories and lived experiences of members of the ECVN, who, in the process of migrating, now felt that they had “lost everything in Viet Nam and now even their church since they are under the C&MA,” and that being subsumed into the CMA as an ethnic church did not align with their own vision of the community they were beholden to, as they did not “feel their responsibilities are limited to the United States, but wherever there are Vietnamese” (Colenso 1980, 3). The creation of an ethnic church, far from being a space that alleviated the shocks and stresses of refugee passage, had come to represent a place that only highlighted a newfound sense of marginalization and subordination that had been assumed in accepting the charity offered to them. Additionally, the

refusal to support the diasporic vision of Christian care (the CMA had refused to fund new refugee sponsorship programs in spite of the continuing influx of Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s, as well as another program to send workers and literature to refugee camps outside the United States) echoed broader national sentiments of ‘refugee fatigue’. The feelings of obligation and guilt that had at first impelled Christian charity for the Vietnamese were replaced with expectations for the Vietnamese to realize that they were beholden to a different set of national (American) and religious (Evangelical Christianity) communities, complete with their own desires and goals that did not align with the diasporic future imagined by the Vietnamese.

A response from Robert Henry, vice president of the CMA, is revealing in this regard. Henry begins by emphasizing the linear progression of time and the impossibility of creating the ‘Tin Lanh’ just as it once was. Henry adopts a tone in his letter that captures the sentiments that motivated the initial outburst of Christian charity, a form of paternalism informed by perceptions of racial inferiority and a reticence to acknowledge the desires and points of view of the Vietnamese in favor of an assimilationist narrative, but also sympathy and an acknowledgement of the uncertainty that came with their passage:

One of the most painful realities of all is the fact that things are not now the way they were, they never can be and they never will be. The clock cannot be turned back. Former conditions cannot be recaptured. The past, with its joys and burdens, its laughter and tears, its successes and defeats.... All is now gone like the waters of a mighty, ever-flowing river. Now our dear brothers and sisters are in a new land, a new culture, an entirely new situation in nearly every respect. The newness is threatening. The ramifications of that newness cannot be fully realized, at the moment. In many cases we choose rather even not to know! If the past has been painful, what shall be said about the unknown future? One could be easily led to the point of despair. But God!
(Henry 1980, 1)

The letter goes on to point out differences between the religious situations in Vietnam, where “there existed a CHURCH and a MISSION... Here in the U.S.A we do not have a church plus a mission. We are all CHURCH” (ibid 2). Henry emphasized that the CMA did not wish to erase

cultural or ethnic specificities, but that it “ha[d] a definite framework to engulf people from various cultural backgrounds, blend them into one church organization, but at the same time grant them the opportunity to be themselves culturally and linguistically” (ibid 3). Henry makes it clear that the Vietnamese becoming part of a whole means being incorporated into a multicultural religious community, where ‘doing’ Vietnamese is relegated to the performance of unspecified but decidedly depoliticized cultural forms, detached from questions and discourses that attempt to understand their position in the diaspora. The Vietnamese in this context are subsumed under the banner of a global Christianity that expands the boundaries of their community, but in doing so erases that which is predicated on a politics of remembering and reproducing the autonomy they once knew.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the earliest years of Vietnamese Protestant flows into the United States and their relationship to the CMA, demonstrating the ways that refugee subjectivities and common discourses surrounding refugee resettlement and assimilation played out in the making of religious spaces. Recreating ‘Tin Lanh’ overseas was not simply a matter of creating a space that would ease the shocks of refugee passage and difficulties of resettlement for Vietnamese refugees, but was a project that attests to the competing visions of futurity and different ways that Vietnamese Protestants chose to make sense of their mobilities. In Tin Lanh, some Vietnamese saw a way to recreate what had been lost in the war and create a space of worship where diasporic and exilic Vietnamese interests could be projected. Others instead chose to lean on the CMA for material support in recognition of the denomination’s role as sponsor, but also as a kind of fraternal ally, bonded by religion and history. Becoming a part of the CMA then became a practical method that the Vietnamese could attain ‘freedom’ through what Mimi Nguyen calls

transnational multiculturalism, which “brings together the assumed scenes of liberalism—again, self-possession as the condition for freedom, especially to act, to contract with others—to name the racial accord of a tolerant collectivity that is particular (in this instance) to the United States, but that is global, as well as governmental, in scope” (Nguyen 2017, 142). To ‘belong’ in this arrangement means to see oneself, or one’s church as being part of a broader body, endlessly expansive in scope owing to its missionary ambitions, but undoubtedly centered on white American evangelical interests.

A discussion of mobility, especially in the context of migration and refugee passage, must confront questions of boundaries and border crossings, both as they relate to legal and territorial borders, as well as the discursive ones central to any identity project. Churches became central mediators of these discourses, where producing meaning out of mobilities, as Vietnamese Protestants did in identifying themselves as exiles, impacted the degree to which they were able to make claims of autonomy over their spaces of worship. At the same time, these claims were conditioned by the moral and material obligations that structured the choices available to Vietnamese refugees at the time. In chapter 2 I explore further the relationship between mobilities and boundaries as relate to narratives of modernity in the present, in which the Vietnamese church is not solely marked by its refugee origins, as its congregations now include children of refugees and present-day migrants who come for entirely different reasons, and who bring a variety of different relations to Protestantism with them.

Chapter 2: Unending Passages: The Search for Modernity and Authenticity

My arrival to the Vietnamese Church of Hope (VCOH) did not occur through happenstance. My mom's best friend (who will go unnamed out of privacy considerations) from Vietnam has been going to this church since its inception, and was the one who introduced me to it. One can attribute this to a universal Christian ethics of hospitality, but I would also learn that there was a deeply personal aspect as well, as this friend had been forced to live with my mom's family during the war. My parents believed that one of the reasons she had been so eager to help my transition to Seattle was not only to help ease the transition of a familiar face, united by ethnicity and personal history, but because this was her way of repaying a decades long debt to my mother for taking care of her doing through turbulent years. They were both able to immigrate to California in the nineties, eventually going their separate ways with my family moving to New Mexico and her's to Washington, and finally reuniting thirty years later when I came to Seattle.

My tenuous connection with this person (though she was very close with my mom, I did not know of her existence until right before I came to Seattle, and do not remember anything of my years growing up in California, where my family and hers would have certainly crossed paths) represents the same kinds of tenuous connections many second-generation Vietnamese Americans have with Vietnam and the war. Their experiences with these things differ from those who lived during the war or came of age in its aftermath because of their physical and temporal detachments, and thus aren't experiences that can't be forgotten per se, but which must constantly be engaged with, and thus must be acknowledged as structuring forces in Vietnamese American spaces. Moreover, the presence of second-generation Vietnamese Americans, as well

as the increasing number of Vietnamese border crossers coming for reasons unrelated to the war or for seeking asylum, in these spaces has meant that meaning and purpose of these spaces has had to change over time (Nguyen 2015). Little Saigons and Vietnamese churches in the United States can no longer just be spatial manifestations of exilic desires or refugee safety networks, even if they never were completely. Still, as diasporic and ‘ethnic’ spaces, Vietnamese churches and other community spaces are often built and designed to evoke feelings of ‘familiarity,’ whether inscribed in place through architecture or through embodied performance, such as in the celebration of cultural festivals such as Tet, or the Vietnamese New Year. Part of my aim in this chapter is to deconstruct this ‘familiarity’ as an affect deeply implicated in the delineation of boundaries, but also to suggest that a fuller understanding of ethnic and religious belonging for Vietnamese Protestants requires we look beyond familiarity and acknowledge the flux inherent in this community.

To label the ethnic Vietnamese church as a strategic memory project or a social service institution that aids immigrants in transitioning into their host societies is to recognize some of the important functions of these spaces, but miss out on another important thing happening in these spaces. Both labels focus our attention on a community’s efforts to respond to their perceived marginalization within a broader society, but also work to further notions of difference and boundaries in which “Vietnamese” culture becomes a homogenous entity that only acts in response to the outside world. While scholarly focus on the role of immigrant religious spaces has traditionally been centered on these functions (see Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Bankston and Zhou 1998), more attention recently has given to understanding the ‘internal’ power relations and social dynamics in these groups that play an important role in determining what interests, moral precepts, and ideas come to stand for ethnic “culture.” Phi Hong Su examined the

dynamics at play in a Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda in post-socialist Berlin, looking at the way that political conflicts in the form of ‘North/South’ divisions shape the social life of these spaces, even as themes of religious harmony and unity are constantly emphasized (Su 2022). Justin Tse has analyzed the quotidian practices, such as language of an immigrant church in Canada as integral techniques for constructing it as a Hong Konger church, even as this narrative is contested by other immigrants from the People’s Republic of China (Tse 2011). Works like these give us valuable insights into the construction of religious spaces as ‘ethnic’ spaces and the contestations that are hidden when these labels go unquestioned.

Vietnamese Buddhists like the ones examined in Su’s study, given the religion’s historical influence in Vietnam, already their associate their religion with their ethnic identity, meaning that their debates are not over “whether their religion represents their Vietnamese-ness,” but rather are political contentions over hierarchies of national belonging (Su 2022, 119). Catholics also have similar attitudes to their religion, and internally do not see being Catholic as having any dissonance with being Vietnamese. But for Vietnamese Protestants, these debates and tensions do exist, and some experience a very real tension between their professed faith and their ethnic identity. The project for Vietnamese Protestants then, is to find a way to reconcile the most important aspects of their cultural heritage with Protestant theologies that call for their erasure.

Reconciling these differences becomes especially important considering the evangelical aspirations of these congregations. The leaders of the VCOH put a lot of priority on proselytisation, and although they understand themselves to be a church situated with universalist, race-blind, global Christian community, many of their missionary efforts are still focused on converting other Vietnamese, resulting in necessary dialogues over the place of many beliefs and rituals considered by many to be core aspects of Vietnamese spiritual life, the most

important of which was the practice of ancestor worship, which many of my interviewees revealed was a key point of tension between them and other Vietnamese. Their ideas on rituals such as ancestor worship can be seen as being motivated by Biblical teachings against idolatry, but are also connected to the ways that Vietnamese Protestants think about and communicate their ideas and visions of modernity, especially as they relate to morality and agency. In his study on the colonial encounter between Dutch Calvinists and Sumbanese converts in Indonesia, anthropologist Webb Keane points that in the missionary encounter, Protestant Christianity becomes associated with a narrative of modernity as the emergence of the emancipated individual that recognizes its own capacity for agency (Keane 2007, 14). And while the connection between freedom and modernity is not unique to Protestantism, Keane argues that it “offered influential expressions of the high moral value of agency,” and that it “ties that moral value to the preliminary task of getting people to see what beings in the world are actually agents” (ibid. 52). The ‘moral narrative of modernity’ figures not only in the missionary encounters between Protestant and non-Protestant Vietnamese, but also plays out in their migrations as well. For those who had been born into the Protestant faith and bring their experiences of practicing and believing in Vietnam, they encounter a church in the United States they see as being more ‘modern,’ not only in the popular sense, but also as a setting more conducive to individual self-transformation. For them, Vietnamese-American churches more closely align with Protestant ideals of sincerity that were not possible to achieve for various reasons in their previous churches in Vietnam. Religious practice and migration become entangled processes, deeply implicated in the ways that Vietnamese Protestants understand their own positions within their own narratives of modernity. The process of becoming ‘modern’ for

some begins at the moment of conversion, and for others is connected not just to their migration, but is explicitly linked to the practice of their faith in the United States.

Whereas my aim in chapter 1 was to understand the way that Vietnamese Protestant refugees produced meaning out of their mobilities, articulating a specific claim to communal autonomy based on claims to an exilic identity, I use mobility in this chapter as an entry point to explore ideas of place, placemaking, and community, with a focus on disrupting normative assumptions that associate these terms with fixity or discreteness. Geographers have long recognized the relationship between mobility and placemaking, and have at various times and for various contexts articulated theories of mobility that do not place it in diametric opposition to place as an “immobile fixing of what has gone on” (Adey 2017, 97). I find Doreen Massey’s ideas particularly useful in this context, especially her call to think of space as a “sphere of a dynamic simultaneity,” in which a heterogeneity of relational practices and processes occur that make any semblance of ‘completeness’ impossible to achieve (Massey 2005, 107). Mobility, travel, and other metaphors of movement represent spatial and temporal events that make explicit the ways that individuals participate not just in the production of space, but in influencing the contours and boundaries of the communities that occupy and constitute that space. Whether through arrival into or departure from a space, individuals are contributing to the place-making project of Vietnamese Protestants in Seattle and the concurrent project of identity construction.

While my primary focus is on Vietnamese Protestant social relations, primarily as they manifest and play out in a single church, and secondarily as this church relates to a broader regional network, my focus is more on interrogating normative assumptions of community than on the metaphysics of space and place. I adopt a similar approach to both in emphasizing relationality, process, and the open-endedness of the community-building project. It is easy to

slip into modes of thoughts when discussing ethnic/religious/diasporic communities, even when acknowledging the relationality or processual nature of how those communities come about, that nonetheless reinforce the fact of unity, of a semblance of coherence or discreteness - that because we are looking at a group of people in some kind of spatial or discursive proximity to each other (that they 'belong' to the same category or label that we have prescribed), they share some kind of overarching commonality that is to be assumed and seldom interrogated. This was a central occupation with my interviewees that I discuss in this chapter, that even if the 'community' as of now wasn't united, that there was some kind of vision and plan for the future in which 'unity' was both a declaration of praxis and social endgame. I believe this can be a problematic way to analyse social relations and identity projects because it assumes a homogeneity that, if not fully realized in the present moment, is at least part of that community's teleology. Instead, I adopt Roger Brubaker's stance in his discussion of the proliferation of diaspora studies to reconfigure how we use terms like 'diaspora' away from referring to any tangible or readily discernible groups to instead understanding how they are used "to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, [or] to appeal to loyalties" (Brubaker 2006). Thus, I choose to understand unity as not just referring to some vague notion of ethnic or religious solidarity or harmony, but as a term or concept mobilized in specific contexts with deliberate reference to specific, sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory, projects of identity formation and boundary making.

Protestant Transitions

The first thing one notices about the VCOH is that finding it is surprisingly difficult. The church is located off of Rainier Avenue between 39th and 42nd Avenue, and a cursory look on

Google Maps shows us that unlike the apartment building and hair salon that sandwich it, the physical building is quite far from the actual street, separated by a long driveway divided by street cones into two small lanes that do not necessarily make pulling into the parking lot difficult, but perhaps more precarious than it would be otherwise. There are trees, both on the sidewalk and immediately in front of the church that only further obscure the building from street view. The best indication that a church does indeed exist at that location are two pieces of signage: the first, a small marquee board, faded ostensibly from age, that gives the Sunday service schedule and contact information for the Damascus International Fellowship (DIF). The second, a rectangular board pasted onto the side of a building, only really visible if one is travelling northbound down Rainier Ave, much of the content in too small of a font to read from the street, save for the words ‘DAMASCUS’ and ‘HOI THANH TIN LANH HY VONG’ (literally the PROTESTANT CHURCH OF HOPE).

This invisibility is an indirect consequence of the arrangement the VCOH has with the DIF to share the building. The other, arguably more significant result is not spatial, but temporal; there is only one house of worship in the building, and because the DIF holds their services in the morning, the VCOH holds its Sunday Service in the afternoon, with members typically arriving between 1:30 to 2:00 in the afternoon, with group prayer time beginning at 2:00, and the services beginning at 3:00. Members of the worship team, those singers and musicians who lead the church in song before the pastor gives the sermon, typically arrive earlier than that in order to set up their equipment and to go through their last rehearsals. I soon realized it was quite common, especially in the winter, for services to last long after the sun had gone down.

What I have just described above is largely inconsequential to the main points of my analysis, but I offer it in order to demonstrate how the focus of my ethnographic observation was

not in grandiose gestures or large-scale expressions of faith and culture (though these will be relevant), but in the mundane peculiarities of the Protestant ritual known as the Sunday service. One such idiosyncrasy can be seen in how language is used and what languages are used at the VCOH. For churches like the VCOH, whose congregations consist both of first-generation border crossers and their children, it is common for two services to be held, one in English and one in the native language of the older members of the congregation who may not be entirely fluent in English. The VCOH used to follow this model, and its vestigial remains still exist in the English Ministry label that church leadership use to discuss any news surrounding the church youth. I call the English Ministry vestigial because while it is still used as shorthand for the youth, there is no longer a separate service held in English. The service is entirely bilingual, from the worship songs being sung in English and Vietnamese, to the sermon, usually given by a pastor in Vietnamese, but which is translated on the spot through an interpreter.

This bilingualism makes the VCOH quite unique, not just among Vietnamese churches, but with ethnic churches in general. The literature suggests that bilingualism is becoming more prominent among ethnic churches but is nowhere close to becoming standard practice, and even anecdotally, it doesn't seem like this is something that happens in any of the other Vietnamese churches in the area (Yu 2022). In every service I attended with a guest pastor that was coming for the first time, they always remarked on the translator and applauded them for the work that role entailed. It was explained to me by current and former members of the VCOH that this practice had first come after restrictions on public gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic had relaxed in an attempt to consolidate the church body and reduce the amount of time spent in public spaces. But the practice has stuck and had the consequence of promoting intergenerational unity that was not possible with separate services. It suggested the construction of space with

totally different motives from the earliest churches discussed in chapter 1; instead of being a space where retaining one's sense of Vietnamese identity was done by transplanting those institutions and structures into new environments, the emphasis in the VCOH was not in 'staying' Vietnamese, but on 'becoming' a Vietnamese church. Bilingual services are one way in which the VCOH is able to enact its own vision of Vietnamese Protestant futurity and unity that complicates the notion of Vietnameseness as a culture of the 'other' or an 'over there' which is retrieved and transmitted through memory. By having its congregation sit together and experience the same service in both Vietnamese and English simultaneously, the VCOH Sunday service represents an active process that reveals the worship hall to be a space of "multiple trajectories; a simultaneity of stories-so-far," so that the project of 'being Vietnamese' is revealed to be far more complicated than otherwise thought (Massey 2005, 24). It is a practice of the quotidian that speaks to an attempt to consider the story of second-generation assimilation, and reconcile the implications of that narrative with what it means to be a Vietnamese border crosser without foreclosing possibilities of unity or Vietnamese futurity, which is partially enabled by the asceticism of Protestant spaces, or the lack of those very signifiers that are needed for essentialist definitions of Vietnamese ethnic identity and cultural heritage and ancestral roots. The members of the VCOH all see themselves as being Vietnamese, and the question becomes how to maintain that identification when those cultural resources that the broader Vietnamese population gravitate towards to make claims to their identity are not available for them or other Vietnamese Protestants.

This notion of hybridity extends beyond the use of language in sermons. Another important part of the service is the aforementioned singing of worship songs. These are also bilingual, but the interesting thing to note is that these songs weren't traditional hymns, but

translations of contemporary Christian songs by bands such as Hillsong or Elevation worship. The song choice is a reflection of the fact that the worship team is mainly composed of many younger Vietnamese Americans who were born in the United States and grew up with these songs. Those who migrated to the United States in young adulthood understood these songs to be part of an assemblage of both informal and formal religious practices that made the VCOH feel more ‘modern.’

When I asked my interviewees who had migrated to Vietnam in the past decade and who had grown up Protestant to compare their worship experiences in Vietnam to that in the United States, many of the responses in some way equated or associated their church experiences in the United States with a more ‘free’ or ‘modern’ one than what they were used to in Vietnam. One of my interviewees had attributed this feeling to observable changes during the service.

Before in Vietnam, I kind of just stood up, and just sang the song. [I] kind of feel bored, don’t feel any touching at that time. But maybe the Holy Spirit moved me, or I’m just closer to God, but I just feel like most of the songs in the US are more touching to me in the way I worship him. And also – that’s the first thing I experience, so that’s why I really like worship time, and the other thing is about the way the pastors preach in American churches, or in VCOH. Different than Vietnamese churches in Vietnam. Because in Vietnam, we follow a really strict structure, and I feel like all of the pastors, they preach just like you read in a book... the way they deliver the information I feel like is kind of boring, and I don’t feel connected with whatever they deliver to my real life. Like they give examples, they give the verses, and they explain, and they connect, but somehow, I don’t feel that really comes from the real connection, with effort in their real life. But here, I feel that way.

Other responses pointed out the more strict government control over religious gatherings in Vietnam, but others also noted a change in the ways that congregations conducted themselves.

In my own opinion, I feel like for the believers in Vietnam, they are very – they take [however] they look on the outside very seriously. Like, I don’t know how to say that, but in Vietnam, I know there’s a lot of families that, inside the family, it’s not great. However, when they go to church, they would – very higher up, and very speak down to you. They take the outside look very seriously, however for me, whatever’s inside is more important. But when I come here, I see that people just go to church with the main

purpose to just worship, to just fellowship. I don't see the true fellowship whenever I was in Vietnam, it was pretty divided, to be honest.

Both responses indicate that far from being just an aesthetic or exterior sensibility, part of what makes their experiences of being religious in America 'modern' is also connected to the experience of deeply felt interior transformations. In Chapter 1, modernity and freedom figured into the story as key ideas in discourses of white respectability, citizenship, and the politics of forgetting. However, Vietnamese Protestant border crossers at the VCOH demonstrate that modernity and freedom are also associated with ideas of authenticity and sincerity. As Chen pointed out in the context of Taiwanese border crossers, notions of authenticity are important for salvation religions such as Christianity because they offer individuals the chance to transform into or become their 'true selves' that "transcend the parameters of social definitions or particularistic ties," but are also conditioned by the everyday lives of Vietnamese Protestants (Chen 2009, 15). Keane also points out the fact that Protestant traditions have long put moral value on the norm of sincerity and see it as "inseparable from other aspects of agency and autonomy that are functions of modernity's promise of more concrete and immediate forms of freedom" (Keane 2007, 229). Thus, the 'American' church experience, mapped geographically rather than onto non-Vietnamese bodies in this context (where a church is rather than who is in it), becomes interpreted as being more 'modern' or 'free' because it is seen as being able to more effectively speak to the spiritual needs of individuals.

The practices and behaviors discussed above are not modern solely on their merit of being 'new' or more 'sincere' than what my interviewees had experienced in Vietnam, but also speak to a specific experience of modernity as the cultivation of individual moral discipline. In migrating, Vietnamese Protestants transition from a society in which the state exhibits a large amount of control over their religious activities, and thus acted as the one of the primary external

factors for policing morality, to an American society that instead relies on the “discipline and mastery of the individual self by the individual self” (Chen 2009, 150). One can see a version of this narrative reflected in some of the more common platitudes shared in the VCOH that stress forming a ‘personal relationship’ with God, privileging individualistic and highly personal forms of spiritual experiences and moral cultivation over those experienced on communal or social scales. This offers an additional explanation for why some Vietnamese border crossers choose to sustain their faith traditions beyond the utilitarian functions that reading the church as purely an ethnic hub for social services would not allow one to see; for newer border crossers, and especially those who had been raised Protestant, they encounter not exactly a new way to experience their faith, but one that is more conducive to upholding one of their key theological beliefs.

Crossing borders as a physical mobility comes with important implications for how Vietnamese Protestants understand their own religious beliefs. In their encounter with new forms of similar religious rituals, the Vietnamese church becomes a space that compels them to reflect on questions of continuity and change, the old and the new, all in the often implicit context of a moral narrative of modernity. And while the individual physical mobilities of most stop in Seattle and the VCOH, the fact that the VCOH exists within a network of Vietnamese churches means that they must make sense of the mobilities, which manifest physically and more abstractly, of those in that network as well. In the next section I move from discussing the implications of mobility at the level of the individual to the regional scale, exploring how the boundaries of community are being constantly made and remade through the politics of church building.

Becomings of the Vietnamese Church

Anthropologist Allison Truitt used Deleuze and Guattaris' metaphor of the rhizome to describe the spread of Pure Land Buddhism in the Gulf South, orienting us to its horizontal connections and outgrowth that happens "in the mud - the disagreements over institutional control and decision-making that cannot be comprehended when Buddhism is seen only in terms of liturgical truths and the spaces of formal worship" (Truitt 2021, 35). Although Truitt is speaking in an entirely different religious and geographic context, the metaphor of the rhizome is also useful for thinking about Vietnamese Protestantism in Seattle, and specifically about the origins of the VCOH. The VCOH emerged not as the result of a concerted church-planting effort, but from a dispute between senior pastor Ho Hieu Ha and associate pastor Pan Phuoc Lau of Hoi Thanh Tin Lanh of Seattle (which I refer to henceforth as the 'Seattle Church,' which is the name that many of my interviewees referred to it by), which resulted in associate pastor Phan Phuoc Lau leaving with several members of the Seattle Church to establish what would eventually become the VCOH. The exact reasons for the dispute were never made clear to me, but my interviewees, many of whom had previously attended the Seattle Church and left with Pastor Lau, had interpreted it differently as a generational divide, or as a general dissatisfaction with the lack of 'true leadership.'

When I asked my interviewees why they had left the church, many had expressed an ambivalence to their decision. While some of my interviewees certainly had their own spirited opinions on the split, many of those who left for the VCOH did so for nonpolitical reasons, and didn't feel strong allegiances to either pastor or church. Andrew Nguyen, a refugee who had left Vietnam in 1981 and had converted to Christianity when he began attending the Seattle Church in 2001, explained that he had only left because he felt that the Seattle Church had become too

big, and he appreciated the smaller size of the VCOH which he saw as being more conducive to cultivating a strong support network. Hung Tran, who was a deacon at the Seattle Church and had personally witnessed the disputes between Pastors Ha and Lau, but said that his decision to move was mainly because the rest of his family had decided to follow Pastor Lau to OVEC. Others had moved because going to the VCOH was better for their work schedule, and that they had actually loved both pastors.

The last point is particularly important because it demonstrates the value that many Vietnamese lay people put on unity. The importance of creating a united church body helps to explain their aversion to the conflicts among the leadership and their insistence that relations between different congregations were otherwise amicable. Unity and communal harmony were also important for the optics of Vietnamese evangelicals, as Hung Tran explained.

We, no matter who we are - if we are the Church of God, then we go out and win people for Christ. The goal is the same thing. So nothing's changed. How to do that is, big difference.... Now it's harder because now, the church is too divided. And when they hear something like that, it's very hard for you to go out and preach the gospel. They say 'really? I heard there's a lot of problems in the church. You want me to become a Christian? I don't want to have that. I don't want to be involved in any problem like that.' People don't know, they don't understand, they just heard things like that. So it's very hard now, to meet the goal.

So division is paradoxically responsible for the spread of Vietnamese Christianity in its current form, but is also recognized as the threat to their goals of drawing new believers to Christ. It is mobility manifested rhizomatically, as people move to different churches and form new denominations for a variety of reasons, but these decisions are almost never justified for reasons that would preclude affiliation with what they see as the broader 'Vietnamese Protestant' community. In fact, the 'containment of difference' is accompanied by various events such as annual church conferences or regional youth worship nights and retreats that bring Vietnamese churches together and demonstrate how "these institutions are built not out of timeless cultural

characteristics but through the ‘active and current construction of meaning and identity performed by community members’ (Truitt 2021, 38). Being in community then, relies not just on feeling or knowing of your ‘Vietnameseness,’ but requires that you be in constant interaction with those that share that same identity. It is a process that is constantly reinforced, and in being reinforced and constantly performed, feelings of ethnic belonging then become naturalized (Fortier 2020, 6).

Their focus on unity is also informed by the particular struggles that the VCOH has had to deal with in recent years. Church attendance at the VCOH had never reached particularly high numbers, but what it had cultivated in its near decade of existence was nearly wiped out from the COVID-19 pandemic. Once in-person services resumed, only the ‘core families’ had remained, referring to those individuals and families who had left the Seattle Church with Lau in 2012. Adding to this was another serious and complicated controversy among Vietnamese Protestant leadership in 2023 that ultimately led to Lau leaving the VCOH to begin planting churches in California and creating a new denomination, now called the Overseas Vietnamese Evangelical Church (OVEC). Lau’s decision to move had left the VCOH without a pastor which became a major source of stress communicated not just in my interviews, but which was made painfully obvious during Sunday services. While Lau did occasionally come back to give sermons, every Sunday service that I observed featured a revolving door of pastors, almost all exclusively Vietnamese (there were three sermons within the last year that were given by pastors from the Damascus International Fellowship) from churches in the region. These pastors were almost always well received by the congregation, and while many of those I discussed this with appreciated the various pastors for volunteering their time and the theological diversity and insights this arrangement brought with it, they also agreed that it was not sustainable, and all of

my interviewees were convinced that the main priority for the VCOH would be finding a new, permanent, senior pastor. Regardless, their connections to other churches in the area, sustained through continued contact and the cultivation of goodwill, became an essential resource that had allowed the VCOH to weather the storm and continue its operations. Speaking in the context of Vietnamese American Catholics after Hurricane Katrina, Geographer Christopher Airress (2008) outlined the crucial role of church-based social capital, of the bonds that churches foster with other social organizations through a sense of shared identity or goals, in allowing for the mobilization of material assistance and support. For the VCOH, unity was their shorthand for their regional, co-ethnic, and co-religious social capital and networks crucial to the survival of the church.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the ways that mobility continues to play an integral part in the politics and philosophies of present day Vietnamese Protestants and the communities they are a part of. Whereas the first Vietnamese border crossers relied on producing meaning out of the exodus from their home country in order to make certain claims to autonomy and agency, the present context requires that we expand our field of view to see the multiplicity of mobilities and flows that now shape the Vietnamese Protestant community. An important part of this is interrogating what discourses of identity and difference are formulated, what they look like, how they are mobilized or contested, and the way that one's experience of mobility, whether performed by that person or simply observing someone else's arrival or departure, operate within these discourses.

For those Vietnamese border crossers moving for reasons ostensibly divorced from the war, their mobilities operate within a particular discourse of modernity. This discourse is centered around notions of freedom and morality, where modernity is experienced through the more efficacious cultivation of individual moral discipline, or being better able to form a ‘personal relationship with God’. In this assumption, spatial distance becomes associated with a kind of spiritual distance that, while meaningful, does not fully preclude possibilities of associating as a united community.

But these border crossers are also injecting themselves into a space with its own set of particular trajectories and already occurring negotiations that demonstrate the flux and constant negotiation of the community-building project of the Vietnamese Protestants in Seattle. It is one in which the dominant form of mobility is not international, but local and regional, as congregational rifts and disputes lead to the formation of other churches. Despite these rifts, or perhaps because of these, there exists a strong desire for unity, which is first articulated discursively in which congregational rifts and denominational divisions become reinterpreted as expressions of internal differentiation within the “Vietnamese Protestant Community” rather than separatist events. This rhetorical move becomes important in times of need, as it allows churches such as the VCOH to exercise social and cultural capital founded on affective ties in order to survive.

Conclusion: Vietnamese/American/Protestants

Focusing on mobility and the various forms it is performed, embodied, and contemplated gives us a way to understand what contexts and pressures Vietnamese Protestants are responding to and how communities are formed in response. In this conclusion I review the ways that mobility has figured into the stories of Vietnamese Protestant border crossing communities in the United States, and how mobility can be used as a hermeneutical device for understanding the different things that coalesce to influence the community building process and how ideas become spatialized, even if this does not mean that buildings are erected or roots are set. I then end with an analysis of historical materials from the Christian and Missionary (CMA) national archives to think about Vietnamese Protestant placemaking in the refugee camps. Specifically, I focus on an essay written by CMA missionaries on a church that emerged in a refugee camp as a means of exploring how mobility is only a central component to the diasporic community building processes and the roles that temporality and contingency play in the process of identity consolidation and subject formation. It is an attempt to “critically engage the war as an important historical and discursive site of Vietnamese subject formation,” while also recognizing that it is just one of many sites, one of many spatial narratives that intersect and must be negotiated with in the search for and construction of a community (Espiritu 2014, 30). It is a way to think about how individuals and groups tie their identity to place, and in that process to notions of fixity and stability, and the ways these projects fail or are reconfigured because of mobility.

By itself, the act or event of mobility, of a displacement over variable amounts of space and time, seems to describe a general fact of life. What distinguishes certain mobilities from others is the meaning ascribed to them, and I have tried to argue that it is this element of mobility, of the way they operate discursively, that can be crucial to the ways that Vietnamese

Protestants understand themselves and form a collective identity. In the years following the reunification of Vietnam after decades of war, this meant confronting the implications of refugee passage on their identity. For many, the answer was to be found by understanding themselves as exiles, constructing a narrative around their migration which crucially did not preclude the possibility of return to their home country. This aspect of the exilic narrative, this potential for a reversal and the implicit orientation or focus on their history, became an important aspect of the spatial imaginaries of some Vietnamese Protestant leaders who sought to ‘transplant’ the religious institutions and ecumenical structures that they had known and experienced in Vietnam into the churches they were helping to establish in the United States.

Of course, there was an understanding that a complete replication or transplanting of their forms of religious practice was impossible and that there would be a need to adapt to their new environment, but this vision of a Vietnamese Protestant community as an extension of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) was contested by many different parties and was also complicated by the material conditions that enabled their refuge in the first place. In particular it was their relation to the CMA, the American evangelical denomination largely responsible for establishing the ECVN, and their material reliance on them as a result of the models of refugee sponsorship and patronage that both enabled and limited any claims to autonomy that Vietnamese Protestants could make to their own spaces of worship. In this framework, one sees the confluence of many, often contrasting claims made by different parties that each sought to produce meaning out of Vietnamese Protestant mobility, and in doing so, were also making different claims for the fate of the community they were to establish.

Decades after the war, Vietnamese continue to come to the United States for a variety of reasons, most of which are detached from the pressing political and social exigencies that

motivated the waves of refugees in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For practicing Protestants who had come to the United States, and more specifically who had settled in the Seattle area, they were encountering a religious landscape in which a Vietnamese Protestant community had been present for more than a generation, and in that time had changed dramatically in key ways. Some of these changes were evident on the smallest, most intimate scale of religious activity: the church congregation. Small divergences from the strict religious orthodoxy of Protestantism as it was practiced in Vietnam, whether it be differences in how the singing of worship songs was addressed, or in the extent of government oversight, became very important for many Vietnamese Protestant border crossers who understood these changes within their own visions of religious modernity. In these visions, modernity was often heavily associated with the ideal of religious freedom and the attainment of ‘genuine’ religious connection on an individual level.

And while modernity is certainly a major theme for some Vietnamese Protestants, it is also clear that there are far more mobilities at play here than those of immigrant border crossing and refuge as they relate to the formation of a religious community and its boundaries. As shown in chapter 2, one doesn’t need to move between countries to materially impact a community, as they can still have an impact simply by moving from one church to another. Mobility is not just something that is retroactively attended to, an event that is only made sense of after the fact in order to understand how it has affected the boundaries of the affected communities, but can be a political tool used intentionally in order to make some kind of claim to autonomy and agency. This is evident when looking at the geographic expansion and outgrowth of Vietnamese Protestant churches, which has been driven in equal parts by evangelical efforts and by internal disputes and fissures within individual churches that result in the establishment of new churches.

These types of mobilities reveal the contradictions and tensions inherent within the evangelical project that understands the expansion of Christianity as its primary goal but is also detrimental to the stability and visions of unity that animate the logics of an ethnic community, goals already seen as particularly contingent and difficult to attain due to the still prevalent notion of immigrant precarity and constant threat of assimilation, and particularly for Vietnamese Protestants, the fact that they represent a religious minority within the ethnic population, with strict doctrinal beliefs that make any kind of post-religious rapprochement particularly difficult.

In the context of the vibrant field of scholarship that analyses the lives of Vietnamese bodies and communities in the United States, looking at a group such as the Vietnamese Protestants does not seem like an obvious choice. They have never been representative of a large percentage of the Vietnamese-American population, and rather than being a religion that is on the rise and gaining more followers now than ever, the contrary seems to be happening as younger Vietnamese-Americans seem to be retreating from institutional religion in general (Pew Research Center 2023). And besides addressing an empirical gap, I believe that looking at this community can be a way to present a new vocabulary centered around mobility through which to explore not just Vietnamese-American placemaking, but other potential sites and communities of interest as well. This is not to suggest that it replace theories and analyses of community building that emphasize place-making through the creation and sustaining of ideas of fixity, rootedness, and belonging, but is instead to suggest that there is a productive tension in attempting to understand the dynamism inherent within processes of community building that can only be understood not just by looking at those who occupy certain spaces at certain points in time, but also by thinking about those that have come and gone, who have left their marks in the minds and spaces in which they once occupied, and also those who have yet to come as well. It is above

all an attempt to engage more seriously in the temporal dimensions of community building beyond memory but not exclusive of it, of visions of futurity with an understanding that these visions are always conditioned by what has come before.

This is also not an attempt to valorize mobility or to present it as anything more than it is; a spatial and temporal phenomenon, a type of displacement that carries little to no meaning in and of itself, but is imbued with meaning by mobile bodies and those they interact with along the way. Theorists such as Deleuze, Guattari, and de Certeau have famously theorized on the ways that certain forms of mobility can be envisioned as acts of resistance, especially as they work to subvert state structures and practices of territorialization and boundary making that seem to impose, if not fixity, then a general sense of order and control over flows of peoples (de Certeau 1984, Deleuze and Guattari 1980). But I agree with Massey's critique of de Certeau in particular when she explains that in this valorization of the nomad, there can be an oversimplification of power relations in these ideas which sees ordered space as a monolithic structure and the various mobilities that exemplify the 'tactics of the weak' are all seen as acts of resistance (Massey 2005, 46). In creating this dichotomy between power and resistance, we do not allow ourselves to see those instances where mobile bodies might exercise their agency, either through their acts of mobilities or by refusing to be mobile, that are not in active resistance to the state and other institutions that constitute dominant power structures. In other words, an effective framework for analysing the kinds of political and social work people perform through mobility also requires a particular view of agency in which "the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity," which in turn, also requires an detailed understanding of the various networks of relations that constitute a space (Mahmood 2011, 14).

As a concluding consideration to further explore how one might use this idea in the context of Vietnamese refugee resettlement and Protestant evangelical aspirations, I return to the work of the CMA with Southeast Asian border crossers. Specifically, I look closely at a report written in 1985 that looks at the work done by CMA missionaries in a Hong Kong refugee camp in order to establish the Vietnamese Boat People Evangelical Church (VBPEC). I want to first establish the provisional, borderline speculative nature of my findings in regards to this church. It is speculative because, as I am primarily interested in understanding what the VBPEC shows us about the relationship between mobility, space, and agency, it is a place of worship that, owing to the scarcity of archival materials on it (I was only able to find one other mention of it in an annual report on refugee ministries), is now only legible from a top-down perspective. There is an extensive body of literature that discusses the inherent limitations of archives, but it is still important to note because it means we are unable to see exactly how the refugees that occupied this space would have understood its functions or what exactly it is that a church, or Evangelical Christianity conversion in general, offered them after they had been processed and were on their way to wherever else they would settle. This is all to say that what I offer here is less a thorough analysis of refugee lifeworlds and more of a provocation: if we must understand agency within the specific discourses in which it is operationalized, then what does it look like, and how is it performed, in the refugee camp, a space defined not only by the exercise of biopower and the management of human bodies and minds, but also by its temporality, in the presumption of its inevitable obsolescence and ephemerality? Furthermore, how does Christianity figure into this picture? In what ways does it structure ideas of agency and condition understandings of the temporal dimension of mobility?

The Boat People and Their Church

Whereas my previous focus in this thesis, particularly chapter 1, was on the processing centers in Guam and the United States, the story of the VBPEC takes us outside the direct confines of the U.S. military and into countries and territories of first asylum for many Southeast Asians fleeing Vietnam. It takes us to Hong Kong, which from 1975 to 1995, the two decades that encompassed the bulk of what would become known as the Boat People Crisis, would see almost 200,000 Southeast Asian refugees cross into its borders and come into its camps, with only Malaysia being the only other country or territory of first asylum seeing more (United High Commissioner for Refugees 2000). Its popularity is owed in part to its proximity with the northern border of Vietnam, but also due to the fact that from 1975 to 1982, it had adopted an ‘open’ camp policy, in which Vietnamese border crossers were allowed to leave their camps in order to work, with many taking the opportunity to work in light manufacturing jobs to earn menial wages as they waited for the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees to decide whether they would be accepted for resettlement in a third country (Lippman 2020, 135). However, this situation proved to be untenable with the increasing numbers of Vietnamese entering its borders, coupled with a reticence of countries of second asylum such as the United States to expand the numbers of refugees they were willing to take, resulting in substantial rises in camp populations and even poorer living conditions in the already densely populated and overcrowded camps. This, coupled with violence within the Kai Tak North camp, then the most populous camp in Hong Kong located within the industrial and residential city of Kowloon that resulted in 176 Vietnamese arrested and more than 20 injured, ultimately led to a change in Hong Kong refugee policy and the establishment of ‘closed’ camps (Bower and Nguyen 1985, 3). Vietnamese arrivals into Hong Kong after July 1, 1982 would be put into one of these twelve

closed camps, often deliberately established in remote areas of Hong Kong and run by the Correctional Services Department (CSD), part of the Hong Kong's Prison Department, where they were not allowed to leave their confines and were subject to strict discipline and regimentation of their daily activities, to the point where "camp dwellers were stripped of all decision making" (Espiritu 2014, 64).

The CMA's involvement with the refugees in Hong Kong began in 1978 with the arrival of Reverends Long Hon Hua and Thomas Stebbins, both of whom had experience evangelizing in Vietnam prior to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Interestingly, this missionary work was not only enabled by the flow of international humanitarian refugee relief, but also by the CMA's prior history in Asia, having already established a presence in China. The open camp policy allowed the CMA missionaries to work with other local Christians to invite refugees to local churches, including a CMA church based in Kowloon to provide humanitarian aid and to preach to them as well (Bower and Nguyen 1985, 8).

This early work was crucial in establishing a relationship with the refugee population and for laying the foundation for the VBPEC, which was established on December 9th, 1979, and was provided its own worship space by the Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund, a U.K. based Christian relief agency. The access to a physical, solid marker of their presence in the form of their own worship space outside the confines of the refugee camp was counterbalanced by an impermanence and planned obsolescence that characterized the work of Christian missionaries, who like the humanitarian relief workers and the refugees themselves believed that Hong Kong and the refugee camp in general was only to be an episode in the longer arc of their journey. This is evident in the ways the authors of the report repeatedly designated the VBPEC as a "transit church" where "people come to the Lord, [get] baptized and then go to a third country" (ibid.

14-15). There is a larger point about the policy of forced repatriation that the Hong Kong government was advocating for that is beyond the scope of this analysis, but suffice it to say that the missionaries of the VBPEC understood that evangelization in the mission field of the refugee camp worked within a different framework of temporality and spatiality. Whereas the typical narrative of the mission positions the missionary as the mobile figure, travelling to the disparate, ‘neglected’ places and proselytizing to the indigenous/rooted population, these positions are flipped so as to make the missionary the only rooted, unchanging part of this church’s congregation. It is in this discursive reconfiguration of actors within the evangelical church scheme that we begin to see a different way of imagining what a church, and more broadly what a community, and their relationship to place, can be.

The authors of the report were aware that the exigencies of the VBPEC as a transit church also meant that the metrics and parameters for measuring the efficacy of the church and its success in evangelizing needed to be reconsidered as well. Whereas the success of a church is typically measured by its membership numbers, it was clear to Bower, Nguyen, and the leaders of the VBPEC that just looking at these figures were inadequate, and often unreliable, measures for success. Any variation in year-to-year church membership was less an indication of any changes in the receptiveness to the message of the missionaries than a reflection of the overall population in the camps. Church membership grew in the years that more people were coming into the camps than were leaving, and declined or stagnated in those years that the opposite was happening, or when arrival and departure rates cancelled each other out. Furthermore, they recognized that the church itself was situated in a political context in constant flux, in which “the opportunities to preach the Gospel come and go in an unpredictable fashion” (ibid. 19). With the introduction of the closed camp policy, there were less opportunities for people to attend weekly

church services, and missionary access to those populations within closed camps became limited as well. The report notes one particular missionary's troubles with accessing the closed camps in which direct ministry became impossible "either because of a conflict with another organization or with the camp administration," noting one particular instance when this individual was "having excited visitations and encouraging Bible study at another camp for awhile, he was chased from the camp with unjustified reasons" (ibid. 19). This is to say that it is impossible to understand the specific history and development of the VBPEC without understanding the specific political and social context in which it operated - the form of this specific transit church and its goals were not just functions of it working with a population of refugees, understood as mobile bodies not intended to stay in Hong Kong for long, but of the ways they were limited by the closed camp policy as well.

The material precarity of the church was the source of consternation for Reverend Tot Van Truong, a former refugee who had come to Hong Kong in 1979 as a missionary and who had helped to establish the VBPEC. In his assessment of the church, Truong noted that he believed the VBPEC "has no strength... because it is financially supported by other organizations... [and] because it is not an established church like any other church, it is for refugees in transit camps" (ibid. 17). Truong's frustrations about the VBPEC come from a dissonance between his expectations, in which mission activity leads to a church being planted, having established roots and on the trajectory towards becoming self-sufficient, and the actual function the church had to serve. Looked at another way, one can argue that this dissonance is also the result of a particular way of thinking about placemaking reliant on the creation of a sense of boundedness, in which people over time will develop affective or spiritual attachment with the eventual goal of creating, in this case, a church community. The missionary is the only figure allowed any semblance of

mobility, as their arrival into a community is what enables the church to be planted, for the roots to develop, and for the population that they serve to become tied to that church, and in that way become part of a Christian community.

Regardless of Reverend Truong's pessimism about the VBPEC's ability to grow in a conventional way, the authors of the report do argue that its position did grant it a unique opportunity not afforded in traditional church-planting missionary contexts:

This 'transit' church may not grow as a regular church but it has a strength that not many churches have the joy of sharing. It is used by God as a reaping vehicle in His ripe field... the people who come to the Lord are the result of the ministry of this church. This fact alone is the strength of the church. The church should capitalize this unique strength in serving the Lord. Rather than trying to build up the membership of the church, it should emphasize on doing evangelism and accept the fact that those who come to the church will move on to another country. (Bower and Nguyen 18-19).

What is happening in this statement is significant because it appends Vietnamese refugee subjectivity with a sense of spiritual agency and purpose through their conversion. The metaphor of reaping, of gathering the crop or harvest within a field that is the refugee population, and is also used in the title of the essay, speaks to the idea that the VBPEC must be understood within relation to both the particular Hong Kong context it is geographically situated in, but in the context of refugee passage and border crosser mobilities in general. In some ways, it is no different from the refugee camp, which is in and of itself a transitional or liminal space, but what the VBPEC indexes is a distinct conceptualization of space in which borders, both those that help form the geographies of nation-states, as well as those borders important for the process of identity-formation, are made opaque. So though it had a building in which it operated, the open and closed camp policy meant that the VBPEC was less of a discrete geographic entity that could be marked by a single point on a map than a network of Vietnamese Protestant converts that covered not only the various camps in Hong Kong, regardless of whether they were open or

closed, but all those that would find themselves in other countries after finally being processed for resettlement. Whereas the conventional refugee journey understands these individuals to be travelling between discrete territorial bodies (country/territory of first asylum, third countries, etc.), those distinctions matter less in the context of the VBPEC. What matters is not so much where they are going, but that the refugees that come to the church can not stay, that they must be mobile. And they are not simply crossing borders as refugees, but they are coming as new believers in Christianity, which imbues them with new forms of agency and resources for building community, but must always be understood in the context of refugee passage, a specific instance of mobility that comes with its own assumptions, meanings, and exigencies.

Bowers, Nguyen and the leaders of the VBPEC that they interview make a point of emphasizing the singular uniqueness of the church, ending their report with the appraisal that it “will never be remembered as an outstanding model of church growth as we understand a local congregation” (ibid. 22). While this may be an accurate assessment within the missionary framework with which they were equipped, I believe that this obscures the continuities that connect the church to other placemaking and community building efforts of Vietnamese Protestants throughout the diaspora. The VBPEC, as a space of liminality, tells us much about the ways that mobilities, through the arrivals into the refugee camps and the inevitability of departure, is, paradoxically, a structuring force of the Vietnamese Protestant community. What made the VBPEC an abnormality for Bower, Nguyen, and Reverent Tot, was its inability to retain its members and keep them rooted. It is exactly what I have argued throughout this thesis to be a crucial element for understanding Vietnamese Protestant lifeworlds and communities: that they are mobile, and that these mobilities must be understood within the context of the discourses that people are part of, and the borders they are crossing in the process.

Final Remarks

A glaring, and somewhat intentional, omission from chapter 2 is any discussion of the legacies of war and its lingering effects on Vietnamese Protestants and the ways they choose to congregate and practice communally and individually. Part of this decision was driven by the information I'd gathered empirically - the VCOH's church lacked prominent markers of post-refuge identity, and although I had asked my interviewees questions about the Vietnam war, living in a post-1975 Vietnam, and their experiences during their various border crossing or refugee passages, it was clear they were more interested in talking about themselves as Christians first and foremost (one interviewee went on a half hour tangent essentially evangelizing to me and extolling the benefits of giving oneself to God). I am sympathetic to Espiritu's concern that "a decoupling of Vietnamese Americans from the Vietnam War risks assimilating Vietnamese into the apolitical and ahistorical category of "cultural diversity," but part of my objective was to demonstrate that the War is just one nexus of Vietnamese American subject formation (Espiritu 2014, 15). In fact, I believe that a potential avenue for future research exists in this religious dimension, and that scholars can do more to understand how Vietnamese border crossers use religion to foreground and interpret their own experiences of war and refuge.

Even for the Vietnamese who had converted in the refugee camps, it was clear that they had used the spiritual resources and significations offered by their newfound Christian religiosity less as a way to reinterpret their lives before refuge, but as the beginning of a radical metaphysical separation through the theme of resurrection, of dying and being brought back to live a new, better life (Chen 2009, 186). In describing the old lives these individuals were leaving behind, my interviewees were not telling stories characterized by trauma or economic or political

hardships, but focused instead on their individual moral vices, of being ‘bad kids’ who fought and smoked, of habits and attitudes that the perceived dominant Buddhist religion in Vietnam and its moral precepts were unable to remedy.

To me, [becoming] a Christian is totally valuable. Because I’m not a Christian before. I’m a Buddhist, something like that, and I didn’t have an idea of what Christian was until 1991 when I accepted Jesus Christ. And not just the idea, but the reality - it totally changed my life. Because I used to be really bad, fighting a lot, smoking, and swearing, all kinds of stuff. But when I received Jesus Christ, it totally changed my attitude, my lifestyle. So that’s the reality, that’s not just an idea.

What is not made directly clear from this interview excerpt is that this particular conversion occurred in the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in Bataan, which was established in 1980 and operated until 1995. Missionary evangelism as a practice fits neatly within an interpretation that sees the work of humanitarian personnel as part of a biopolitical regime intended to “turn them into ‘good citizens,’ to instill in them American values and practices,” and while I agree with the general terms of this argument about the international refugee regime, I believe it gives us an incomplete picture of the things that influence the actions and motivations of Vietnamese Protestant border crossers, specifically as it relates to their spirituality (Espiritu 2014, 60). Of those Vietnamese Protestants that constituted the initial waves of refugees coming to the United States, a not insignificant amount of them had been Protestant before they had ever set foot outside of Vietnam. This is important because if this was in fact the case, it calls into question the connotation of Protestantism, specifically Evangelicalism, as something that is distinctly American. I am not denying the obvious influence that Christian values have within the American ethos, but religious doctrine and spiritual systems of belief, once introduced to a receptive population of people, becomes subject to individual and collective agency in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways.

In other words, Protestantism or Christianity may be introduced as an ‘American’ or ‘Western,’ but in the missionary encounter, and especially after it, can lose those associations as practitioners use it in their own unique social contexts. Examples of this are plentiful, whether we are looking at the presence of Christianity among modern Koreans and Korean-Americans, its influence in Hmong social life, or even in the Spanish-colonial Philippines, in which conversion and the Catholic ritual of confession were used by speakers of Tagalog to negotiate Spanish demands and colonial subjection (Rafael 1987). This is all to say that analysing religion, especially one as heavily associated with Euro-American values as Protestant Christianity, forces us to think critically about the assumptions that help determine the line between subjection and resistance, assimilation and the retention of ‘culture’ or ‘heritage,’ and the boundaries of ethnic or national identity.

As I write my concluding remarks, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War will have come and gone. In Little Saigons and Vietnamese neighborhoods across the country, Vietnamese veterans in military fatigues and their families will have gone out to the streets to participate in somber parades to commemorate what they see as the ‘Fall of Saigon,’ a moniker that works to reaffirm the sense of tragedy these events are designed to evoke. The persistence of this feeling of loss attests to the afterlife of the War, and continues to animate the placemaking and politics of the Vietnamese diaspora, even as the number of those that fought it in or were directly affected otherwise continues to shrink.

As I demonstrated in chapter 1, out of these feelings of loss and exile can come a desire to ‘remake’ the institutions and social spaces that were available to them in Vietnam, even as the conditions of their precarity and refugee subjectivity make this impossible. The Vietnamese Protestants who sought to recreate the Evangelical Church of Vietnam in their new homes not

only faced resistance from the CMA which had sponsored not only their resettlement but their churches, but from fellow Vietnamese Protestants who envisioned an entirely different community not beholden to their memories of the ECVN. This tension is a reflection of debates within the broader Vietnamese diasporic community about the Vietnamese nation and their complicated attachment to it. For some Vietnamese-Americans (and especially those with anticommunist sympathies), the country represents both their homeland as well as something lost to time and memory, a nation now that is unrecognizable after its reunification under the communist government. For Protestants, this is doubly true, given their status as religious minorities that instantly places them under heightened levels of government scrutiny and surveillance. The political situation has changed so that return is possible, and that is something that many Vietnamese Americans take advantage of. It is this act of return, a mobility that has been imagined for so long, finally manifest, that reveals its own impossibility. For if and when they step foot in Vietnam, they are not returning to the Vietnam they once knew; they are coming to a place that will have been changed by history. It will be a Vietnam that will have been changed by that initial instance of mobility, the refugee passage, that they once took part in.

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