Risk as Mobility:
Undocumented Vietnamese Migrants in a Transnational Legal Limbo

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis looks at the Vietnamese undocumented immigrants in Berlin and their choice of risk as mobility through their perception of risk, their migration experiences, and their recollection and retrospective evaluation of risk. Risk here refers to the dangers and challenges the immigrants perceive and face in preparation for migration, en route to, and in Berlin. These three distinct moments unfold in three locations: Vietnam, the Eastern European countries they traverse, and Berlin, but flow in an integral continuum and not as separate or independent intervals. The three moments show the fluidity of migration and the transnational nature of risk through the linkage between temporality and spatiality, and between perception, experiences, and memories. I juxtapose theories with ethnographic accounts and oral history narratives to illuminate how these theories play out in the experiences of the Vietnamese immigrants. I embrace the departure from the sacrosanct separation of nature and society as seen in various bodies of scholarship of late, including political ecology and urban studies.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

**Ethnographic Context of Undocumented Vietnamese Immigrants in Berlin**

This thesis looks at the experiences of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants in Berlin by following their migration paths from Vietnam to Berlin and how they manage to stay in Berlin albeit their lack of legal status. Undocumented Vietnamese immigrants came to Berlin in various ways. A large number were former guest workers (Kolinsky 2000, Dennis 2007) who disobeyed the ordinance to return to Vietnam after the Berlin wall fell in 1989 and fought for their rights to remain in Germany, though many still have not been able to acquire legal status. These guest workers created an ethnic business niche (Schweizer 2004) that allows for new waves of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants to come (Glassey-Tranguyen 2005a and 2005b). Though these groups were first living in Eastern Germany, they did spread over to the West after the Wall fell. Their presence and informal economy, alongside black market trading and criminal activities that create an ethnic stigma against the Vietnamese (Bui 2003), prompted resentment from their ethnic counterparts in the West, the majority of whom were boat people and their families.

The focus of this thesis is on the undocumented immigrants who use underground channels to migrate from Vietnam to Berlin via Eastern Europe, and earn a living in the informal economy created by the Vietnamese former guest workers\(^1\). The immigrants first travel legally as an exchange student or a tourist to an Eastern European country, and use underground channels to reach Berlin. Some had come since the early 1980s, while

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\(^1\) Since there are still undocumented immigrants coming to Berlin today, I use the present tense when referring to undocumented migration in general, and the past tense in the particular cases of Lê Thắng Lợi, Phan Hiền Mạnh, and Võ Thành Khánh.
others are attempting informal migration as of this moment. Unauthorized border crossing of Vietnamese bodies from Eastern Europe into Western Europe, therefore, follows a continuous flow for over three decades and include different trajectories. Not all immigrants are unauthorized and/or have the intention of using undocumented migration at the start. Phan Hiền Mạnh\(^2\) (Glassey-Trànguyễn & Phan 2004), for instance, originally came to study in the Czech Republic in 1982 but chose to stay when the Eastern Bloc collapsed and the Vietnamese government ordered all students to return to Vietnam. Mạnh migrated to Berlin undocumented in 1990 and conducted wholesale trades in the black market. He sought asylum in Sweden in 1992 and received refugee status there in 1998. Lê Thắng Lợi (Glassey-Trànguyễn & Lê 2005), on the other hand, travelled to Moscow as a tourist and paid smugglers to get him to Berlin in 1993 and 1999, with a four-year hiatus of returning to Vietnam from 1995 to 1999.

I would like to note that there were Vietnamese exchange students who came to the former East Germany, or the GDR German Democratic Republic, in the early 1980s. Several of them chose to remain in Germany after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and often managed to gain employment during the years post-Wende through entrepreneurship or service work owing to their schooling and German language facility. They are, however, not the focus of this thesis. Nonetheless, their experiences enhance my understanding of Vietnamese immigrants in Berlin at large, and undocumented immigrants in Berlin in particular. During my fieldwork, I observed that opening a business has been a common

\(^2\) I use the Vietnamese convention for the names of narrators cited in this thesis: surname, middle name, given name; and use the person’s given name instead of surname in subsequent references. I use the Western convention for my name in keeping with previous publications.
way for Vietnamese students to remain in the host socialist countries afterward, such as in Poland and Germany, and was also the case for Mạnh in Sweden.

In “Rethinking Asian Mobilities” (2014), the cultural anthropologist Christina Schwenkel traces the experiences of contract workers from East German factories to their return to Vietnam. She coins the term ‘socialist mobilities’ to refer to “the oft-overlooked circulation of people, goods, knowledge, and capital between communist states before the collapse of the Soviet Union.” “Socialist mobility” is an understudied area in literature on the Vietnamese diasporas and Vietnamese immigration. Following Schwenkel’s concept of ‘socialist mobilities,’ I call the underground migrations of Vietnamese to Berlin via Eastern European countries “undocumented mobilities.” These undocumented (and I should add that there are ‘socialist’ elements here as well) movements are not only overlooked, but often understudied because of their illicit nature. Moreover, the narratives of undocumented migration, as in the cases of Mạnh and Lợi, show the complexity of these human movements, which can be secondary, circular rather than one-directional, and multi-sited or ‘serial’ to use Susan Ossman's term (2013).

I argue that Vietnamese undocumented mobilities to and in Berlin forge a legal limbo both during migration and after arrival in Berlin, with risk as their choice of mobility. First, by using the informal migration channels to reach and stay in Berlin, the undocumented Vietnamese immigrants forge a legal limbo that they need, endure, and sustain. The legal limbo is a space that is physically inside and legally outside of Berlin, an intertwined 'thirdspace' (Kahn 2000) that engages ostensibly opposite realms of legality and non-legality. Second, by choosing the high risks associated with
undocumented migration to seek a desired destination, these Vietnamese immigrants actively negotiated for their chance to select a country of resettlement. Their act of autonomy is not free of structural constraints, but an effort to negotiate with them.

Methodology

The data that informs this thesis come from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and cross-lingual oral history interviews. The thesis draws from my year-long ethnographies and oral history narratives in Sweden, Poland, and Germany and follow-up visits since 2004. I spent twelve months conducting fieldwork and interviews in 2004-2005 at these three sites, and returned for follow-up visits in 2008 and 2009. While the thesis is not explicitly comparative, my research in Berlin was formulated against the backdrop of my ongoing engagement with Vietnamese Orange County, which has been my home site since 1994.

For the longitudinal ethnography since 2004, I pursued fieldwork in Vietnamese immigrant populations in Sweden, Warsaw (Poland), Berlin (Germany), and other parts of Europe. This multi-sited approach allowed me to engage with the main sites while gaining a pan-European perspective. This engagement also helped me understand how the Vietnamese immigrant experiences are connected across the various sites in Europe. My oral history methodology is cross-lingual and biographical. I conducted the interviews in Vietnamese using the biographical approach instead of the thematic abridged format, and translate/transcribe them into English (all translations in this thesis are mine). Oral history is labor intensive and time-consuming in itself, and cross-lingual
oral history is exponentially more so. Nonetheless, I found myself fortunate to be in the field when the majority of the Vietnamese diasporas still used their mother tongue as the primary language. In recent years, diasporic generations of Vietnamese descent have come of age, and it would necessitate the use of local languages to conduct in-depth research of the Vietnamese communities in these locations. In future development of this project, I intend to cite related publications in German, and further engage with the Berlin general public in forthcoming follow-up visits.

The biographical format I use in oral history interviews allows me to get at deeper narratives and ask follow-up questions that open up nuances and detours. The biographical approach opens up linkages that inform the researcher about the narrator's life events that shape his or her current experiences. A case in point is the interview with Phan Hiền Mạnh, who was introduced to me as a businessman in Malmö, Sweden. Had I interviewed him using the thematic approach, I would have circumscribed the interview to just his business dealings in Sweden and missed his entire history of circular multidirectional migration. Since my initial pursuit of oral history research in the early 1990s, I have observed that the biographical approach is not only useful, but crucial in enabling me to get in-depth information when the meeting time with an informant is limited. This is particularly important for work with undocumented immigrants who are constantly on the watch and on the move, and need to optimize their time to work to send money back home. It is not always easy to get an undocumented immigrant to sit down for extended conversations because of the demand of their work time and the constant fear of police and/or other constraints. Additionally, because of the nature of their undocumented life,
immigrants move between places constantly or wherever they can find work or refuge and lodging.

**Political Ecology of Risk**

This thesis follows the call for attention to and integration of the non-human in urban spaces through the examination and analysis of risks in undocumented immigration of Vietnamese through Eastern Europe to and/or through Berlin. In particular, I embrace the departure from the sacrosanct separation of nature and society. One exciting challenge I continue to work with in using political ecology theories in my research for the very first time is how to work the environmental and ecological focus into the ethnographic text, and how to identify and grapple with the non-human.

Paul Robbins (2004) argues that political ecology is “an urgent kind of argument or text (or book, or mural, or movie, or blog) that examines winners and losers, is narrated using dialectics, begins and/or ends in a contradiction, and surveys both the status of nature and the stories about the status of nature” (Robbins 2004:viii). In that urgency, Neil Smith argues that capital is continually invested in and withdrawn from the built environment to produce surplus value and expand the basis of capital itself (Smith 1984:6). In particular, Smith is asking a question that “is essentially geographical.... It is not just a question of what capitalism does to geography but rather of what geography can do for capitalism” (Smith:1984, pg 4). Robbins (2004:158) also reminds us of the racialization of space, or the spatiality of environmental racism. Hence, as Smith asks, “how does the geographical configuration of the landscape contribute to the survival of capitalism?” Smith reiterates the need to debunk the conventional notion of separation
between nature and society, which shrouds the reality that nature is intimately connected to social processes and human activities. This is one aspect that I am working to bring to the foreground of my ethnographic writings.

Robbins maintains that “Political Ecology is the Quality of a Text” (Robbins 2004:86), which alludes to the ongoing, open-ended, often times contesting field of political ecology. He writes:

This highly motivated but necessarily ambivalent community is held together by more than skepticism, however. It is also linked together by an amorphous and ever-changing canon of texts. To be clear, by text, I do not solely mean written and printed articles, though these are most certainly and extensively included. Text here describes symbolic content, images, and media that tell stories. This includes books, of course, but also maps, videos, conference presentations, online powerpoint slides, audio logs, blogs, and other artifacts of communication.

Furthermore, Robbins (Robbins 2004:87) argues that:

Political texts are empirical in that they are based on the myriad rigorous methods, including participant observation, ecological field study, remote sensing, oral history, and immersive experience. They are theoretical, insofar as the inspiration and interpretation of data and knowledge produced in situ are examined through multiple lenses drawing on the traditions of critical theory described earlier, including Marxist, feminist, and anarchist traditions, but also a range of other categorical and conceptual approaches. But as noted previously, the enormously eclectic and sometimes contradictory combination of these many techniques and ideas is not what makes political ecology, and its texts, a coherent whole. Instead, it is the overall conventions and orientations of political ecological text that give it a unified effect. These qualities together make political ecology a form of representation, or argument, or literature.

Another analytical lens in political ecology, namely uneven development, can help us grapple with one aspect of ‘the status of nature’ - to use Robbins' phrase - and the stories of such status. Smith argues that “uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and
structure of capital” (Smith 1984:4). Uneven development also needs to engage space and social processes at all levels, for capital achieves the production of space in its own image (Smith 1984:7). By exploring the production of space, we can get at “a more complete integration of space and society in the theory of uneven development. For not only does capital produce space in general, it produces the real spatial scales that give uneven development its coherence.” In this thesis, the Vietnamese undocumented immigrants produce a space for themselves in their own legal limbo in the German capitol Berlin, a space that participates in the Berlin’s informal and service economy but not in its formal socio-cultural life. In this way, the ‘uneven development’ of informal capital leads to an uneven production of space.

Other prominent scholars of political ecology, such as Bruce Braun (2002), also depart from the idea of separation between nature and society. Braun asserts that far from being separate, nature and society infuse each other. He argues that nature's externality (Braun 2002:ix) - the idea that nature is separate or opposed to society - “is merely an effect produced through the discursive and material practices of everyday life” (Braun 2002:x). As Braun sets out to show, in the temperate forests, there is “a complex terrain of culture, politics, and power... within which the rainforest is continuously stabilized and destabilized as an object of economic, political, and aesthetic calculation and in which the future of many actors - both human and nonhuman - hangs in the balance” (Braun 2002:x). Through examining and analyzing this complex terrain, Braun shows how the production of space and the production of nature come hand in hand in a Foucauldian genealogy that “...points to the historical, cultural, and political conditions
through which objects attain legibility” (Braun 2002:3). Braun gets at this ‘profusion of entangled events’ - to use Foucault’s phrase - by breaking apart the forest. That is, “...to potentially open space for a more informed - and inclusive - public debate over what sorts of futures we want, a debate not constrained by the binary terms of contemporary forest politics” (Braun 2002:4). The impossible goal of reaching communal consensus and unity over the in/temperate forests points to the fact “...that if we listen attentively, and critically, we can locate affinities, build coalitions, and imagine other, better, ways of being together that do not reduce all of nature, and all of culture, to the logic of the commodity” (Braun 2002:6).

Political ecology also deals with the many paradoxical realities in our contemporary world, as in the case of systemic inequalities in food provisioning and labor laws on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico borders as discussed by Sandy Brown and Christy Getz (2011). The authors provide a clear picture of how food production reflects the transnational structures of profit for some and vulnerabilities for others. Smith’s argument on the mobility of capital is apt here - that capital is continually invested in and withdrawn from the built environment to produce surplus value and expand the basis of capital itself (Smith 1984:6). In the case of farmworker food insecurity, not only that capitalistic social relations create a cartography of hunger but an unjust geography of human survival. In the end, food insecurity is an environmental issue. In thinking about undocumented migration, I ask: how can one discuss ‘legal insecurity’ of unauthorized immigrants as an environmental issue? There is also another connection with Smith's point on that fact that the geographical configuration of the landscape contributes to the
survival of capitalism, especially in the way the human society demarcates itself from ‘nature' and in the case of farmworker food shortage, the demarcation between first- and third-world countries, between legal status and lack thereof, between capital and labor, and between food surpluses and deprivation.

Smith also insists that “uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital” (Smith 1984:4). As Brown and Getz (2011) point out, the production of food insecurity and socio-economic inequity are at the core of “the relationship between activities of the state, including national governments' immigration laws, labor regulations, and social policies, and the international trade regimes that have privileged transnational corporate interests over smallholder agriculture” (Brown & Getz 2011:140). This argument urges me to look at the field site as a web of entangled inequalities, where undocumented Vietnamese immigrants are hashing out their lot by embracing the multitude of ongoing risks as well as their risk residues and memories of risk. As I examine the transnational nature of risk in the undocumented Vietnamese immigrants' experiences, I take heed of Bram Büscher’s call for attentiveness to the larger structures of power relations that influence the lives of my ethnographic informants (Büscher 2013:10):

While many authors ultimately stress the partial, limited, and refractory nature of their ethnographic observations, I emphasize the structural features to which I believe my ethnography directed me. This is why I argue for ethnographic research that links different levels of abstraction, has a special eye for power relations, and combines agency with structure.

The larger structures of power relations in Vietnamese undocumented mobilities range from each nation’s control over the migrants’ bodies and its measures of legal
exclusion (including Vietnam, Eastern European countries, and Germany), the smugglers’ network and its absolute power over the immigrants during underground passage, the spatial arrangements of Berlin as a city, and the Vietnamese informal economy as well as the Vietnamese crime network in Berlin. Moreover, I think the local weather can be a form of ‘power’ over the immigrants, particular the harsh cold winter because they do need to get up in the wee hours after midnight to start working. Given the constraint of the thesis, I will fully explore and develop these ideas in the dissertation and further integrate political ecological thoughts in my analysis.

Theoretical Framework

There are three main parts to this thesis. In the first section, I define the concept of risk and look at how risk is perceived in the preparation stage for migration in Vietnam. I examine risk as ‘a collective construct’ (Douglas & Wildavsky1982) whose perception evolves around social factors (Douglas 1985) in the context of cities as “dense networks of interwoven socio-ecological processes” (Swyngedouw 2006). These social factors allude to “the activities of most people making complicated decisions” (Chibnik 2011:61), and make ‘risk as a choice’ a form of belonging. Building from the concept of ‘illegality as risk' (Castañeda 2009) and ‘choice as belonging’ (Gammeltoft 2014), I argue that risk is a form of belonging for undocumented Vietnamese immigrants because of the familial sentiments attached to risk taking. Their ‘choice as belonging’ renders their ‘risk as belonging.’
Following the call for attention to and integration of the non-human in urban spaces, I argue that risk is an inherent factor in the Vietnamese immigration experiences, for formal/documented and informal/undocumented migration channels alike. Through oral history narratives and ethnographic accounts, I show how the immigrants perceive and articulate risk as their means to migrate. Risk is their choice of mobility. In particular, I explore questions that get at what makes a group more susceptible to risk, which could be owed to their economic constraints as in the case of scrap metal collectors of unexploded ordinances (Schwenkel 2013). Against that larger context, I place the trajectory of undocumented Vietnamese in Berlin in the vein of anthropologist Christina Schwenkel's (2014) “Rethinking Asian Mobilities” as part of the socialist circulations since the migration paths take place in socialist or former socialist nations.

In the second section, I look at the accounts of risk the immigrants experienced en route from Vietnam through Eastern Europe to Berlin and how they negotiate with these risky situations. I revisit the concept of risk as a social construct in the immigrants’ retrospect. The undocumented immigrants gain a much more intimate relationship with risk post-migration between sites (they remain ‘in migration' at the desired destination because of their undocumentedness), and have a much more realistic perception of it. As Phan Hiền Mạnh puts it, “I don’t know why I was so adventurous at that time.” I follow Erik Swyngedouw (2006:20) on his insistence to see cities as “dense networks of interwoven socio-ecological processes that are simultaneously human, physical, discursive, cultural, material, and organic.” This view opens up the context of undocumented Vietnamese migration beyond the human actors, and allows for
examination of factors and agents that directly impact the migration processes that were previously ignored, such as the built and ecological environments through which the undocumented Vietnamese have migrated and lived. In particular, I argue that the migration route remains present post-migration. In his acclaimed feature film “Mother Fish,” director Khoa Đỗ (2013) superimposed the boat escape onto the sewing shop to show how memories coalesce with the present in an immigrant’s psyche. I argue that in very similar ways, the Ukraine deep forests remain real in the everyday life of undocumented Vietnamese in Berlin. Risk therefore remains ‘real' for the immigrants, not only because of the unprocessed memory of risk encountered en route to Berlin, but also because of the risk they face in Berlin.

In the third section, I argue that as the undocumented immigrants continue to confront risk as part of their everyday experience in legal limbo within Berlin's urban space, risk as mobility remains an ongoing choice and reality. With their retrospective perception of risk, the immigrants continue to juggle risk and to be on the move owing to the demand of their work and living situations in the informal Vietnamese Berlin context. First, I show that the undocumented immigrants express their aspiration for participation in the city and actively embrace risk as a means to claim their “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996) despite the spatial governmentality and technologies of control (Murray 2008). With active determination, Lê Thằng Lợi, for instance, continues to take risk in the form of various strategies to challenge the Berlin government's refusal to grant him asylum and circumvent their efforts to deport him and his family.
Second, I look at how risk continues to be present for Vietnamese undocumented immigrants in Berlin's public spaces owing to their lack of legal status in connection with ethnic stigma (Bui 2003) and intra-ethnic tensions. In this context, I investigate the relationship between risk and the immigrants' access to space, and how such a relationship complicates and limits the notion of risk as mobility. For participation in the urban space, I draw from De Certeau’s conceptualization of how a city is habituated. As he puts it, “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (de Certeau 1984, 93). Yet for the undocumented Vietnamese immigrants, they are at once invisible as members of the ‘ordinary practitioners of the city' to use de Certeau's phrase, and highly visible because of the legal limbo they occupy. With risk at their side, undocumented Vietnamese immigrants participate in the Berlin's urban space, “a texturology in which extremes coincide” (de Certeau 1984) and continue to be on the move while juggling their risk, at once “squatting” (Leung 1992-1998; Leung & Sturken 2005) and moving. As a result, their choice of risk as mobility does not end when the immigrants reach their desired destination, but both the risk and the movement remains a reality for them.

By way of conclusion, I further grapple with the concept of risk in the urban space from an urban political ecological viewpoint. How can we understand risk more fully as a social collective construct within the actor networks of urban ecology? What are some productive ways to think about the human bodies as not independent entities but a part of the larger landscape? In the experiences of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants discussed in this thesis, the human bodies are intimately connected to the environment,
most evidently so during the most crucial part of the immigration: the passage through the deep Ukraine forests. What other questions can I ask to get at the radical intimacy between risky spaces and human bodies moving through them? What does political ecology look like in undocumented Vietnamese spaces in Berlin, via Ukraine and Warsaw? In which other ways can we gain a better understanding of the temporality of risk: prior to experiences of risk, in the moment of risk, after the risk, and in this case, continued risk. How would the narrative look differently if I were to use ‘vulnerability as mobility’ instead of ‘risk as mobility’? I hope to explore these questions through follow-up fieldwork in the future and in my dissertation.
Chapter 2: Risk Perceived in Preparation for Migration

Risk as a Collective Construct

In the personal history narratives I gathered since the 1990s of Vietnamese immigrants in the diasporas, the theme of dis/re-location and movement is omnipresent, and risk is an inherent part of the human movement within and outside Vietnam. Vietnamese were already refugees in their own homeland during the French colonial period and the Vietnam War. As I have argued elsewhere, the meta-events – such as the 1954 Geneva Accord and the subsequent Southward migration of Northern Vietnamese – mask over the multi-directional and much more complicated trends of migration in twentieth-century Vietnam (Tranguyen 2004; Glassey-Tranguyen 2015). In the 1940s-1950s, Vietnam was at the height of chaos, simultaneously confronting the French colonial demise, Japanese occupation, and anticipated American involvement. Beyond economic adversity, war atrocities were a common part of life, and prompted human movements across the country and region. Nghiêm Đại Đao (Glassey-Tranguyen & Nghiêm 2000), a surgeon at the University of Pittsburgh Hospital, recalled his family's constant relocations during his early years in a biographical oral history interview:

... In 1945, when the Japanese were invading Vietnam or Indochina at the time, we went back to Hà Nội from Cambodia by boat to go faster. We stayed in our birth house, about ten kilometers from the non-controlled French area. There was no school. My Dad and sister taught me as much as they could. But my Dad was killed by the French when they raided us in 1948. I was only seven years old.

I argue that given the long history of relocation and displacement in their own home country in the twentieth century, ethnic Vietnamese have already faced risks as an inherent part of their migratory realities, both at home and abroad. As discussed in the
introduction, risk is socially structured in multi-actor network and can be displaced as various actors see risk differently (Robbins 2007). Risk as a concept is conceived differently by different people. In dealing with risk, it is necessary to think about how to separate risk as a concept from risk as a perception.

Theorizing risk and risk perception requires an attentiveness toward cultural, environmental, and social factors. In their instructive work on risk and culture, Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982) theorize risk as a collective construct. They maintain that “research into risk perception based on a cultural model would try to discover what different characteristics of social life elicit different responses to danger” (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982:8). They emphasize how people make the choice of risk according to their social habitus (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982, 8; italics mine):

*The choice of risks and the choice of how to live are taken together.* Each form of social life has its own typical risk portfolio. Common values lead to common fears (and, by implication, to a common agreement not to fear other things). There is no gap between perception and reality and no correct description of the right behavior, at least not in advance. *The real dangers are not known until afterward* (there always being alternative hypotheses). In the meantime, acting in the present to ward off future dangers, each social arrangement elevates some risks to a high peak and depresses others below sight. This cultural bias is integral to social organization. Risk taking and risk aversion, shared confidence and shared fears, are part of the dialogue on how best to organize social relations.

Risk can indeed serve as part of the social fabric and foreground the social environment in which a person belongs. I argue that for the Vietnamese undocumented immigrants, this social aspect of risk not only makes risk seem manageable, but gives risk a social meaning and forges a solidarity of sort of the undocumented collectives. Those who have gone before and made it abroad enable the aspiring immigrants to see that they can confront risk and embrace risk to attain their goal of migrating abroad – despite the
fact that they do not know the ‘real facts’ about the risk. While risk is not static, its abstraction makes it more possible to embrace than its ethnographic details.

**Social Factors in Risk Perception**

The theorization of risk perception by Douglas et al is applicable to the case of Vietnamese undocumented immigrants in Berlin. The authors argue that indeed, “People order their universe through social bias.” People face risk head-on. Human beings are selectively risk averse (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982:79; emphasis added):

> Against established theory, people are not risk averse for negative prospects, only for positive ones. We do not follow the simple rule that says to reduce uncertainty: when the prospect is negative, however enormous the possible loss, if its probability of occurring is low, we can generally push it out of the arena in which we are choosing. So we actually are creatures who habitually tolerate risks.

Since human beings are risk tolerant, we do make risky choices according to our perception of risk. “Choice requires selection, and selection demands judgment not only about what is but what ought to be in the future. Somehow, somewhere, a moral judgment has to be dredged up from or imposed upon all the data. Adding more data will not always make the choice easier” (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982, 84). The processes of risk perception and risk selection go hand in hand, and both are predicated on the social factors involved (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982, 80):

In risk perception, human act less as individuals and more as social beings who have internalized social pressures and delegated their decision-making processes to *institutions*. They manage as well as they do, without knowing the risks they face, by following social rules on what to ignore: institutions are their problem-simplifying devices.
The undocumented Vietnamese immigrants face many risks and fears that come from their social and cultural contexts. I argue that there are informal institutions that allow for the risk selection: the smugglers, the informal economic niche at the destination, and the families back home who would respond to the migrants' needs en route such as sending more money to the smugglers upon demand. Outward migration has been a much sought-after way for upward mobility in Vietnam since the late 1970s and early 1980s until today, with domestic migration increasingly urbanized. People look for ways to migrate at all costs. Prior to departure, they confront anticipated separation from family, perceived job uncertainty due to lack of legal status, lack of capital to pay the underground immigration channels, risk of choosing the wrong office to file paperwork with and ending up losing money without getting to migrate, perceived risk of death en route, perceived dismantling of the family, perceived risk of long-term debt and interest from loans to pay for the immigration, perceived risk of being returned to Vietnam if their plans fail abroad. Võ Thành Khánh (Glassey-Trànguyễn & Võ 2005) talked about the costs of unauthorized immigration, both in monetary and social terms:

It is very expensive to immigrate this way. Everyone hopes to work and earn enough to repay the smuggling fee, and to provide for their family. Both the rich and the poor go through this channel. Some spend up to seven months trying to immigrate illegally. They are caught, imprisoned, and trying again once released. Some try for an entire year.

These risks confirm Douglas' insistence on the social factors in risk perceptions, factors that are immediately connected to the migrant's context as well as the larger social contexts. Jake Kosek (2006) points out that risk is geographical, racial, and
socioeconomic. Risk is not simply displaced as Robbins (2007) argues, but part of a much more complicated network. Risk is also perceived differently, particularly between the state and its people as argued by James Scott (1998) or between those engaging in risky activities such as collecting unexploded ordinance and others (Schwenkel 2011). As such, risk and vulnerability can be mapped on communities and locations. Risk is indeed a product of social relations that come about through complex and unpredictable processes. When others perceive these activities as risky, they would label them as irresponsible and question the risk-takers’ motivation and rationality. The risk takers would be marked as ‘other’ and when they die or disappear, there is a lack of sympathy toward them because of the lack of understanding of the social context. There is a perception that these individuals should not have gotten themselves into such risky situations in the first place. These discourses continue to be mapped onto new immigrants at the present moment, especially women bodies. Yet risk is rational, even though it might ostensibly seem like a bad choice. No one can foretell a risk until it happens. Risk is, at best, uncertain.

Indeed, uncertainty is a central aspect of undocumented migration. Several Vietnamese have tried to migrate abroad in search of employment opportunity and returned. As Ivan Small (2012) keenly observes in what he coins “regimes of return,” those returning empty handed are viewed as failures and face great challenges in eeking out a life after they return. Christina Schwenkel (2014) traces the human flow from Vietnam to the diasporas and back and shows that several returning expatriates find
themselves with unstable employment or no job prospect, resorting to performing odd
jobs or ‘nghề tự do.’ As Lê Th ång Lợi put it,

No one left with efficient luggage. We did not have the right documentation. Each
family quickly escapes. If you succeed, you are very lucky. An escape is a matter
of life and death, but you escape regardless. We only hope to have a decent life.

**Choice of Risk as Belonging**

In their articulation of risk perception and risk taking, undocumented immigrants center
family relations in their migration choices. Familial sentiments are the thread that
remains the ultimate and foremost underpinnings of their transnational migratory
decision. Vietnamese undocumented immigrants articulate attachment to their family and
home in their decisions to migrate and where they want to live. In her ethnography of
dealing in desires, sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoàng (2015) shows how some women
make conscious and difficult choices to leave their family to go abroad to improve
family's livelihood via marriage with other men even when they are still in love with their
husbands. Going abroad is a viable option for economic survival of the family, with all
the risks and vulnerabilities attached. During the oral history interview at the refugee
camp in Berlin where his family stayed, Lê Th ång Lợi repeated his desire to make a
better life for his family through undocumented migration:

I am trying to live and stay alive because of my three kids. I am the pillar for my
family, so I have to try. My children are still young. If I do not stay sane then it
would be my wife and my children who would suffer first. If anything happens to
me, my wife and children will be the first to suffer. I am not even mentioning the
fact that I might suffer, which I accept, but I do not wish for my wife and children
to be suffering.
Lợi spoke of his role as the anchor of his family, a role that he must uphold at all costs despite his circumstances and bipolar disorders:

But if I talk about responsibility and duty, then right now I am the father of three children. I am a husband. My principle is I must shoulder my responsibilities regardless of how much suffering I endure. I must be here so that my wife and children have someone to rely on. If I collapse, my wife and children will be in trouble.

Similarly, Võ Thành Khánh spoke about the undocumented immigrants' emotional life, “They suffer a great deal. They are emotionally deprived because their families live in Vietnam.” Phan Hiền Mạnh, likewise, spoke of his emotions toward his birth family when he first migrated to the Czech Republic to study at the age of eighteen,

My parents were very hardworking and they dedicated their lives to us their children. That was my most astounding impression. It is also my lasting impression of Vietnam, the parents’ love for their children. Although I have left Vietnam since 1982, it has been twenty-two years, but that love has never faded in me…. I arrived in the Czech Republic in October, the year 1982. I was almost 18 years old when I left. I was very sad when I left my family. When my mother took me to the airport to go to the Czech Republic, I was still crying very hard. From the time I was born until that time, I never left my family and I never traveled away from my family for over two hundred kilometers.

and the times he risked crossing the border back and forth to see his then girlfriend and to visit his former ‘home' in the Czech:

As I had mentioned before, I had met my girlfriend, I kept going back and forth between Germany and the Czech Republic while sustaining my business. Although I had my business, I kept sneaking back and forth through the border, because for all the time that I lived in the Czech Republic, there were many memories. I still remember the streets that I often walked on. I would remember the benches that we sat on for a beer after playing sports. Those memories still remain fresh in me. I would never be able to forget them… And although at that time in Germany I was a stateless person, I kept going back and forth between the two countries to visit my girlfriend. I had thought about bringing my girlfriend to Germany so that together, one day, we would be able to build up our business and
to resettle there. At that time, I had somewhat formulated my decision and I wanted to stay there. I was rather certain unlike the time before. After that, I did come back to the Czech Republic to bring my girlfriend to West Germany.

As I have argued in this thesis, undocumented migration is not one-directional, but can be circular and simultaneously multi-sited. Undocumented migration is not only a form of risk as mobilities, but also a space where the immigrants express familial and social sentiments in relation to risks. The excerpted narratives show, among other things, how familial relations are at the core of their decisions in transnational migration. In Trần’s narratives, he explained how his unauthorized crossing of the borders was not prompted by economic motivations alone, but by his attachment to a previous residence, a former home in the Czech Republic. He said,

...Although I had my business, I kept sneaking back and forth through the border, because for all the time that I lived in the Czech Republic, there were many memories. Those memories still remain fresh in me. I would never be able to forget them. And although at that time in Germany I was a stateless person, I kept going back and forth between the two countries to visit my girlfriend…

I suggest that by paying attention to these sentiments, we can gain greater insights about the reasons and risks behind undocumented migrations, and how immigrants are willing to take these risks to fulfill not just economic desires but emotional needs as well.

Building from Castañeda’s concept of ‘illegality as risk’ (2009) and Gammeltoft's ‘choice as belonging’ (2014), I argue that risk is a form of belonging for undocumented Vietnamese immigrants. Derived from the aforementioned concepts, the phrase ‘risks as belonging’ speaks to both the precarious reality of undocumented life and the way in which the immigrants make difficult decisions to take the high risks in underground
migration for the sake of their family. Like the parents-to-be facing a dire choice in Gammeltoft's ethnography, undocumented immigrants are in charge of their own decision. Yet also like those parents, the immigrants make choices in relation to their families and how their immigration would affect their loved ones.

Although I too see pregnancy care as a matter of subjectivity formation, my experiences in Vietnam have compelled me to interpret my material along other lines than those laid out by Michel Foucault and his followers. As Tuyệt and Huy articulated it, choice was less a question of what an individual prefers to do than a matter of with whom he or she belongs, a question of what demands are placed on him or her. Although they certainly indicated that they found themselves in an acutely painful situation of choice, the prospective parents I met in Hanoi did not represent the decision they faced as a matter of freedom. Rather, they defined it as a question of social attachments and obligations - to their relatives, to other community members, and to the nation. Striving to find their bearings in an excruciating and morally disorienting situation, parents-to-be as Tuyệt and Huy looked toward others, considering the opinions of physicians, family members, and acquaintances; in enacting their decision, they also enacted social belonging” (Gammeltoft 2014:20).

The immigrants take risk in order to improve or sustain their family's livelihood. To return to the discussion above on the concept of risk, the act of risk taking also evokes the collective aspect of risk construction and social factors in risk perception. Taking risk is a conscious and rational choice that undocumented immigrants make in response to the need to improve their family’s livelihood and future.
Chapter 3: Risk Encountered En Route and Recalled in Retrospect

Experiences of Risk as Mobility

Võ Thánh Khánh spent his days roaming the (now defunct) stadium where most Vietnamese undocumented immigrants find employment and social refuge in Warsaw. He also ‘hung out’ with the smugglers and stayed at the smuggling stations in the forest. He recounted:

Fifty to one hundred Vietnamese come to Poland illegally everyday. They fly from Vietnam to Moscow, and stay in car trunks from Moscow to Ukraine. They go through the forest from Ukraine to Poland. Each person pays 5500 to 6000 Zloty.

What happens when risk unfolds en route during undocumented migration? Despite their anticipation of risk and perception of risk, immigrants can be overwhelmed with the reality of risk as it takes place. Some of the risks they encounter during migration between Vietnam and Berlin include separation from family, risk of disintegration of family, perceived job uncertainty, risk of fee increase and the smugglers harassing family back home, risk of getting caught by the police/border patrol, risk of rape and/or physical assaults by smugglers, fear of the smugglers (or ‘bộ đội’), risk of death from various factors (such as hunger, exhaustion, getting shot by the police, etc), risk of being held back by smugglers for extended time (even up to several months), and risk of being dismembered by smugglers (such as having a finger chopped off by the smugglers to pressure the immigrants’ family in Vietnam to pay more).

These risks take us back to the social factors in the perception of risk and point to the large actor networks across which risk exists. The continuity of risk through time and
space is evident here. Take the perceived risk of family separation and dismantling.

Khánh described how the immigrants look to each other for support during the strenuous passage through the forests:

Their primary challenge is the dismantling of the families they have in Vietnam. They came here as single individuals, and just pair up. Women look for men for support. For some, their wives and husbands in Vietnam are unfaithful. They endure all the hardship and the separation from the family, but the hard money they earned is wasted... They left to improve their family's situation, but even before they arrived at their desired destination, they already sought out alternate families for support.

Besides the challenges of being without paper in Berlin, other immigrants like Lê Thắng Lợi faced other risks on their way to Berlin's legal limbo. Of the two times he entered Berlin, Lợi travelled to Moscow as a tourist and paid smugglers to get him through the Ukraine forests to Berlin in 1993 and 1999. Võ Thành Khánh described the passage of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants through Eastern Europe. The immigrants' greatest fear rests with the smugglers, or 'bộ đội,' who transfer the immigrants from Russia to Warsaw via the forests for a fee. Khánh described 'bộ đội' as members of crime networks that willingly perform any tasks for money, regardless of how brutal such tasks can be. The name 'bộ đội' came from the smugglers' wearing green khaki clothes and hats, and some of them having served as as soldier in the military back in Vietnam. With the smugglers as their ultimate fear, the undocumented immigrants encounter risk as it unfolds en route in various ways in Võ Thành Khánh's narratives:

Smuggled men face less problems than women. They all endure the lack of food and strenuous walking between sites. People walk around 200 kilometers in the forest. Women, especially young beautiful girls, run the risk of being raped. All of the girls are sexually abused. The second problem is the fee increase en route. Between sites, the fee jumps up. If the people are unable to pay extra, the
traffickers beat them up and force the families to send more money. The smuggled people have to pay many prices throughout the journey. Many young girls jump off from the high buildings to commit suicide when forced into sexual activities. Words get out. People are frightened when they go through those sites. The smuggled people are afraid of many things. They are afraid of the police. They are afraid of the smugglers. They are afraid that they can’t pay the extra fee.

When an undocumented immigrant keeps crossing border, risk becomes more apparent at each crossing and can become unbearable at a certain point. In his serial unauthorized migration, Phan Hiền Mạnh crossed the border from the Czech Republic, to Berlin, and then to Sweden. Taking risk time and time over allowed him to move unauthorized to destinations of his choice. Drawing from and advancing Heidi Castañeda’s concept of ‘illegality as risk’ (2009), I look at risks in undocumented migration from the other side: risks as possibilities, risks as mobilities. For undocumented Vietnamese immigrants, there are risks en route to and on site in Berlin. Scholarship on undocumented immigration, such as in ‘shadowed lives’ (Chavez 1996), has traditionally focused on the costs of unauthorized migration, in which risks are often seen as a disabling agent. With a mindfulness of the precarious conditions in which undocumented immigration often takes place, I want to look at risks as an enabling agent, an opportunity, a creative pathway, and an only option to immigrate for some. Võ Thành Khánh reflected on the fact that both the rich and the poor used this migration channel. Undocumented migration is indeed an important choice of mobilities. Phan Hiền Mạnh recalled crossing the Czech and Germany borders multiple times, and was wondering how he could be so unafraid of the risks. He said,
... At that time, I decided not to come back to Vietnam or to return to the Czech Republic. I decided to disobey the ordinance from the Vietnamese embassy. So I remember that in 1990 after I met with a friend in East Germany, he said that I should stay with him if I did not wish to return to Vietnam. He said that we could stay together and collaborate to earn a living. At first, we also ran a small business like any other Vietnamese, but I was more fortunate than the rest because I spoke Slovak. There were many Poles coming to Germany for trades. So it was fortunate that there were many Poles coming to West Germany and I was able to connect different niches and developed my marketing network. So I, of course, could communicate much more efficiently with the Polish business people than the Vietnamese in Germany. Of all the goods and merchandises that they had, I was able to acquire them...

...I started to establish a small business for myself. I worked together with my friend, and we purchased a car. I’m not sure why I was that adventurous at that time. I did not have any kind of legal documentation, and to buy a car like that was very risky. And, in my mind, I thought that in Western European countries, even when they caught you, they would not abuse you physically like in Eastern European countries. It was a thought that I had in mind and I kept believing in it. And because of that very simple belief that I was convinced to stay in Germany...

Indeed, no one would be able to fully fathom the risk until they have experienced it and even long after their encounter with risk. Mạnh’s reflection on his inability to understand why he was so willing to take risk - “I’m not sure why I was that adventurous at that time” - points to the gendered difference in risk perception. Risk is an adventure and accepted for men, but not for women.

**Risk Recalled and Gendered**

The undocumented immigrants gain a much more intimate relationship with risk post-migration between sites (they remain ‘in migration' at the desired destination because of their undocumentedness), and have a much more realistic perception of it. As Phan Hiền Mạnh put it, “I don’t know why I was so adventurous at that time.” Recalling past
experiences is not always an easy task. If the memories are deep-seated and of sensitive nature, the act of recalling might be strenuous, truncated, and emotionally charged. Undocumented immigrants can recall their migration experiences with each other as an act of solidarity and comfort, but their work and life situations do not offer too many opportunities for such an activity. Because of the trauma they experience in undocumented migration, immigrants might find it difficult to recall their trajectories for an outsider who does not share their experience. Of the undocumented immigrants I met during fieldwork, men were more willing to share the details of their passages. There is a lack in literature on the relationship between risk and gender. In early Vietnamese immigration, male dominance was the case, especially with the boat people. Labor migration with socialist countries saw a more balanced gender ratio. Undocumented migration – while with high risks as found in boat escapes albeit with its own contextual particularities – has a high level of women participation. This can be explained in terms of increased female migration worldwide and in Asia (Fawcett et al 1984). Still, risk taking for women is seen as deviant and stigmatized. The moving female bodies are seen as problematic and nonconforming. A gendered analysis in risk shows that women as risk takers are seen as deviant. I will continue to develop this missing point in the literature in my dissertation.

Undocumented women were less comfortable or willing to discuss their migration experiences. The women immigrants I talked to did share about their journey but brushed over the whole thing with comments such as, “It’s not worth talking about.” In Eastern Berlin, a woman declined my request for an interview through her sister in-law, and said,
“There is nothing happy about my life. What’s the point of recounting it?” I argue that the dearth of women’s voices on undocumented migration can be due to several factors. First, there is discomfort in recalling traumatic experiences. There are also shame and emotional burden associated with sexual assaults en route. Women also face the demand to work and earn as much as possible to remit money home. They might never have a chance to articulate their experiences and it might not be financially beneficial to them to recall the events. Of the women I did get to talk to, they brushed over the passage through the forests, and spoke in more general terms about their journey. Hiền, a young mother in her twenties, used smuggling services to go from Vietnam to Warsaw, then to Sweden and stayed with a relative in Skona. Her now-husband filed paperwork to bring her from Sweden back to Warsaw and legalized her entry the second time. Hiền mentioned the strenuous walk in the forest, but did not share information about the other aspects of the walk. I suggest that the women's unwillingness to discuss their passage might mean that these memories remain raw and unprocessed with the potential to intensify in isolation. As such, these memories remain as immediate as their experiences at the time they happen, and can have greater impact on the immigrants' psychology than for those who have discussed them.

**The Memory Work of Risk**

Through their narratives, undocumented Vietnamese immigrants show how their experiences involve several complex networks of actors beyond the human bodies. These networks continue to influence the immigrants after the actual encounter, more so if such
encounters unfold in risky moments. In particular, I argue that the migration route remains present post-migration. In his acclaimed feature film “Mother Fish,” director Khoa Đỗ (2013) superimposed the boat escape onto the sewing shop to show how memories coalesce with the present in an immigrant’s psyche. “Mother Fish - Cá Mẹ” maps the past onto the present, meshing memories with everyday life post-migration, especially traumatic moments. The past remains real for those who continue to live it in their psyche. I argue that in very similar ways, the Ukraine deep forests remain real in the everyday life of undocumented Vietnamese in Berlin. The forests are residual space in the memory of undocumented migrants. Risk therefore remains ‘real' for the immigrants, not only because of the memory of risk encountered en route to Berlin, but also because of the risk they face in Berlin.

I argue that memory is a form of invisible unstable ecology. There are physical memories such as abandoned infrastructures. “It was here that tens of thousands of guest workers were staying right after the Wall fell,” my host Phạm Thị Bình told me as her husband and daughter waited in the car to stay warm. We stood on iced ground at a dead lamp post outside the fenced-off deserted housing complex. It was a bleak March 2005 night with some drizzle earlier. Bình waited after suggesting that I videotape the site. I turned on my camcorder and spanned the area. The recording yielded little. It was dark. The vague harrowing glow conjured up by light sources in the surrounding distance had shadowed over the area. I could make out the silhouette of the buildings behind the fences, with their doors locked up and taped over. It felt almost like we were somewhere else, not in metropolitan Berlin. The place was hauntingly empty. Not a single sound.
Bình's family had just brought me to a refugee camp to visit the family of Lê Thắng Lợi. Binh asked her husband to make the detour for this stop after the refugee camp. She stood quietly and patiently by me, possibly harkening back to her years as a guest worker. Binh took in the sight, and slightly turning to me, she spoke as if to herself, “There were shootings here, too, between the groups. You can still see the shattered glass windows.” Her words were as if to conclude an informal pilgrimage to a shrouded past.

My fieldwork in Vietnamese Berlin did not begin with visits to the refugee camp and the housing complex, but these two sites keep resurfacing after that one-time encounter. They are like the void that is not empty, for they hold the unspoken tales of Berlin's past and present. They are the between spaces, or the 'non-place' as Marc Augé (2009) would have it in his attempt to get at alternative understanding about space, and the human practices and experiences in and between spaces. They return to haunt the pages of my field notes and writings on Berlin. The sites suggest that while Berlin aspires to be a world city, the German capital still has unfinished business of an uneasy past on the ground. I argue that the vacated housing complex and the refugee camp, albeit sharing no historical connection pre-Wende, do connect in the post-Wende era through the undocumented immigrants, who seek asylum at the refugee camp but having come to Berlin because of the economic prospects created by the former guest workers. The complex and camp are physical reminders of geopolitical projects and their remnants, the residues of a part of Germany's recent history. While the former guest workers are now either back in Vietnam or have migrated to other parts of Germany or Berlin, the housing complex remains symbolic of a transitional time that means different things for the
people involved. The housing complex reflects an abandoned project that is ‘squatting’ (Leung & Sturken, 2005) in the unified Germany. Though the guest workers had passed through these apartments during the post-Wende years and are now occupying new spaces in German (or Vietnamese) society, this space remains a part of an untold and forgotten narrative. They are landmarks that suggest immobility within the immigrants' self-directed mobilities. Though these sites are visible public spaces, they are at the same time ‘hidden’ from the public view because they no longer attract the media attention, nor do they have an active function in Berlin's aspiring growth and ongoing changes. They become footnotes that the new German public is too busy to be concerned with. They exist almost independent of the now bustling hustling Vietnamese Berlin scapes, such as the wholesale and cultural centers, the faith communities, the non-physical communal scape of Vietnamese Multikulti, and the Vietnamese-owned businesses scattering around the city.

Memory of risk can forge a kind of residual space that sustain the fear and trauma associated with risks the way that the housing complex can bring back haunting experiences of shooting and violence. Residual risk can work to suture the memories of traumatic migration that undocumented immigrants once face, long after the actual risky events have taken place.
Chapter 4: Risk in An Urban Legal Limbo

Legal Limbo Defined

I have argued in the Introduction that undocumented Vietnamese immigrants forge a legal limbo in Berlin because of the nature of their informal entry. What does a Vietnamese legal limbo look like in Berlin? It is diverse and flexible. In the spirit of thirdspace, I argue for a legal limbo that is not in opposition to the official polity of Berlin, but as an informal space in relation to and in response to it. I have argued in the introduction for the fluidity and continuum of risk in undocumented migration across the geographical points. In this continuum, the legal limbo has its impetus in the beginning and throughout the migration process, and is physically situated in Berlin. The immigrants officially enter the undocumented status the moment they leave from Moscow for the Ukraine forests, but I argue that the semi-legal travel from Vietnam to Moscow is very much part of the whole undocumented trajectory. In that sense, the legal limbo is in Berlin but is connected to the sites along the migration path. Through their acts of undocumented migration to and residing in Berlin, these immigrants create an interstitial space that is productive for not only themselves but making economic contributions to Germany as a whole (Schweizer 2004 & 2005). In this space, the undocumented immigrants straddled between legality and non-legality, between the formal and informal economy. The legal limbo is open but not equal for all. In this limbo, Lợi’s only option was to keep petitioning for his asylum status, while Mạnh who had arrived in Europe ten years earlier could resort to his larger networks to seek other
options, both in Berlin and beyond. It is important to note how legal status is not static. By choosing to remain in the Czech Republic in 1989, Mạnh went from a legal to an unauthorized resident.

There are studies (De Boer et al. 2010) that document the exploitation of undocumented immigrants in underground economy. But I argue that legal limbo is not simply a place of vulnerabilities. The undocumented immigrants choose to perform menial and low-pay jobs in the informal economy because such work still allows them to earn a transnational income that uplifts their family back home. Therefore, undocumented migration and informal labor remain a viable choice for working or staying abroad for many Vietnamese in Berlin. Phan Hiền Mạnh recounted how his entrance into legal limbo was shaped by regional politics and personal aspirations:

...I worked as an interpreter until 1989, having lived in the Czech Republic for seven years. That’s when changes started to take place in the Eastern European countries in political structures and regimes. It started out in Germany and then in the Czech Republic, in Poland, in Hungary, then my perception started to shift. Back then, information about the West was very scarce, but in 1989, I started to see things clearly… I was prompted to leave and I became curious about other places. I was not pushed around or oppressed in any way in the Czech Republic, but I only wanted to pursue what deemed better… After I finished my studies, I went back to Vietnam once in 1986 and again in 1990. In 1990, I would like to stay with my parents as much as possible, but I had to earn my living so I came back to the Czech Republic to continue working as an interpreter. Of course, when I talked with my friends in 1989, I already had that idea of leaving my family for good…

It is worth noting that the human networks both at home and abroad were present and influencing Mạnh's decisions, aspirations, and actions. These networks sustained Mạnh either from afar (i.e. his affinity to his parents in Vietnam) and directly (his friends
who get him started with the business in Berlin). The social fabric continued to show how risk was negotiated and mediated in Mạnh’s case:

...I met my current wife when we were on the plane in 1990. So we started dating then. In 1990, there was an ordinance from the embassy that forced us to come back to Vietnam. So I thought, well, I have heard about life elsewhere. It would be a pity if I did not get to see what it’s really like. So I decided to go to Germany. At first, I went to East Germany and I saw a friend. Some Vietnamese had established small businesses there and I already started to see that life was much better than what it was in the Czech Republic or in Vietnam. Of course, everything was strange to me and I was a new fish in a strange pond, but because I had heard stories from friends before, I remained curious and continued to explore. Then I went to West Germany and, wow, they had changed so much. So I looked between East and West Germany and I saw huge differences, not to mention Vietnam. It was very different in West Germany. How could that be?
...When I first came to Germany, I had thought that if the police were to arrest me, they wouldn’t beat me up. Of course it was very difficult. Quite frankly, at that time, the retail business like that was rather normal. We worked out the paperwork together. I had no other choice. I wanted to leave the Czech Republic. I had no choice, so of course I was worried, but I couldn’t do anything else. Although through my friend, I was able to acquire some kind of document, but it was all an illusion. It was only something to hold on to…

If Mạnh decided to migrate to Berlin because of its advanced development, he was able to stay because of his friends and their business network. In that way, he entered a legal limbo that was not just frightening, but supportive and encouraging. On the other hand, Lợi tapped into the pro-immigration network in Berlin and used local politics to sustain his legal limbo that was much more complex than Mạnh’s. He said,

...I was born in 1974 in Hanoi. Life was difficult, from the everyday conditions to issues such as freedom of speech. I first came to Berlin in 1993. I came back to Vietnam in 1995 and returned to Germany in 1999... In 1996, we had our first child. I planned to escape again. We split up and went into hiding. Our firstborn soon asked, "Where is Daddy?" My wife could not tell my daughter where I was… In 1998, we had our second baby and life became too difficult. In 1999, we went to Russia and then Germany. The German government asked us where we had been. I said that we went back to Vietnam, but they did not believe us...
... I have never experienced a moment of peace here in Germany. The court had just processed my refugee application, and turned it down again. I reapplied right away.... Back then, the police had caught me and wanted to deport me. I got crazy. I just went nuts. I had to hide. Imagine living eighty days in a tiny space. My only friend was the watch. My only food was instant noodle, three packs a day... Then the court agreed not to deport me. They forced me to report to them which church had hidden me...

Lợi did not have the benefits of knowing a European language like Mạnh. His movement would involve his wife and three children and as a result could be more challenging. Yet Lợi understood well certain deportation laws and used them to keep his family apart when deportation was a threat, and to regroup when the possibility of receiving asylum emerged. He also connected with local pro-immigrant networks when he needed to go into hiding and to stay connected with his wife at the same time.

Confronting Risks in An Urban Legal Limbo

When it comes to movement, Vietnamese undocumented immigrants face additional risks that might not apply to others, such as in regard to the Schengen Law. The European Union established the Schengen Law in 1985 to uphold the free movement of EU citizens in participating EU and non-EU nations. This law allows every EU citizen to travel, work, or live in the specified area without having to prove “who I am and where I belong” (promotion video “Jogger” on http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/index_en.htm). As of July 1, 2013, the European Commission reports that “the border-free Schengen Area guarantees free movement to more than 400 million EU citizens, as well as to many non-EU nationals, businessmen, tourists or other persons legally present on the EU territory.”
Germany is an EU member and inside the Schengen area. However, the crime activities that take place among Vietnamese groups in Berlin would lead to police searches and more frequent contact with local law enforcement. This situation makes the Schengen Law moot for Vietnamese undocumented immigrants, who would otherwise have not been asked for their documentation after having entered the Schengen area. They enter a “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) in the Schengen area as a result of their ethnic association and the disadvantages of the informal Vietnamese scapes in the German capitol. In Berlin, the undocumented Vietnamese immigrants continue to face risk as part of their everyday life in the city of their destination as played out in legal, social, political exclusion. Risk continues to be present for Vietnamese undocumented immigrants in Berlin's public spaces owing to their lack of legal status, in connection with ethnic stigma and intra-ethnic tensions. Furthermore, the continued coupling of risk and the immigrants' access to space complicates and limits the notion of risk as mobility.

The risk they continue to face are many: separation from family and emotional distress/isolation/loneliness, job uncertainty (their only employment option is in the Vietnamese-niche informal economy or black market sales, both of which are unstable and ad-hoc), fear of police arrests and public spaces, fear of family disintegration (the workers at a food-to-go store in Berlin talked about Cô Vân, the owner, who works hard to send money home for her daughter's college education but her husband is squandering the money on wine and a girlfriend), fear/risk of difficulty filing paperwork when necessary with the Vietnamese embassy (because of their lack of legal status, Vietnamese undocumented immigrants depend on the Embassy to help them with travel paperwork
when the need arises, such as to go home to attend a parent's funeral), fear of being returned or deported to Vietnam and falling back into poverty (as discussed in section 1 on perceived risks prior to departure of regimes of return (Small 2012) or Schwenkel’s (2014) discussion of returnees with no job prospect or pursuing ‘nghề tự do’), fear of local Vietnamese crime networks (smugglers, băng đảng/crime networks, etc), and the like.

One prevalent risk for all undocumented Vietnamese immigrants, however, is their encounter with the law enforcement and the ethnic crime networks. In the actor network of Berlin, the legal regulations on immigrants are non-human actors that the undocumented immigrants fear. The law interacts with the immigrants' relationship with agency and space. Berlin's busy cityscapes make legal surveillance more challenging. The governance of human movement in space and place becomes much more complicated in the urban space because of how dense the urban networks are. Risk in the urban context undergoes more modules of rule. Martin Murray (2008) shows how the experiences of the unwanted in the urban space are subject to spatial governmentality, the range of technologies of control, the entrepreneurial image of citizenship, and the transformation from citizenship as possession to citizenship as capacity in the spatial landscapes of Johannesburg after apartheid. Lê Thằng Lợi remembered the intensity of hiding in a tiny dark room over an extended period of time to divert the police attention and delay his family's deportation:
The court had just processed my refugee application, and turned it down again. I reapplied right away. Back then, the police had caught me and wanted to deport me. I got crazy. I just went nuts. Imagine living eighty days in a space that is 40x7 seven meters. My only friend was the watch. My only food was instant noodle, three packs a day. When I ate, it was only to stay alive. I had no feelings, no taste. I had insomnia. I was too shocked and fearful for my condition. At midnight, I was soaked in sweat. I was scared and I was screaming loudly. Then the court agreed not to deport me.

As both narratives of Mạnh and Lợi show, risk is salient in the experiences of undocumented immigrants. In her multi-year study (2004-2006, and 2008) that surveys unauthorized migrant patients at a Berlin clinic, Heide Castañeda (2009) shows how illegality is a health risk factor amongst unauthorized immigrants, who avoid or delay treatments for fear of deportation. The German law criminalizes health workers for helping undocumented migrants, making it even more challenging for health activists to provide the much-needed care for the large population in point. She argues that while unauthorized workers are increasingly serving as the backbone of the labor force in several first-world countries, ‘illegality’ has been understudied (Castañeda 2009:1552). Immigration scholars, such as Mae Ngai (2004), have defined “illegality” as “an expression of juridical status and social relation to the state” (Ngai 2004:152). Yet risk can bring the affected group closer, as Võ Thành Khánh observed how “The undocumented refugees face the everyday threat of being imprisoned, interrogated by the police, and pushed around. Such pressure prompts them to bond and extend their support for each other.”
Yet in the face of risk, undocumented immigrants persist with their goal to claim a space in Berlin. Despite his lack of legal status, Lê Tháng Lời asserted and insisted on his right to participate in the Berlin's economy:

I do not want to rely on the German social welfare. However, the German government did not allow me to go to work. I always prepare myself so that whenever I am allowed to work, I would be ready. Why would I want to work? Because I do not want to become a burden to the German society. The German government had pushed me to a corner. I am not allowed to go to school or to work. They forbid me to do everything. For a man who is the pillar of his family like myself, this does not work. Had it not been for my wife and my children, to live like this is suicide for me. I do not have a way back either. There’s no return for me. But to stay here is barely an option. The door to freedom has shut closed. What do I live for? If I cannot do anything, I am a useless person. If I am useless, then what do I live for? It is hopelessness.

If the urban space is laden with contradictions, so are Lời’s narratives. He at once lamented that “the door to freedom has shut closed” and insisted that “there’s no return for me.” He was negotiating for his entry into the legality of Berlin by asserting his self-sufficiency and refusal to depend on the welfare system, yet earlier in the interview, he expressed his disappointment toward the Berlin government for not providing him with food stamps after they promised not to deport him and placed his family at the refugee camp. Here, I am not focusing on the reasons that Lời had these contradictions, but rather, to highlight how contradictions are inherent in the experiences of undocumented lives.

Risk as/and Mobility in Residual Space

In the previous section, I argue that memory is a form of unstable nonmaterial ecology that encompasses social networks and spatial realities. Despite their lack of legal status,
the undocumented immigrants do participate in the urban space of Berlin. I follow Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization of how a city is habituated. As he puts it, “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (de Certeau 1984: 93). For the undocumented Vietnamese immigrants, they are invisible as members of the ‘ordinary practitioners of the city’ to use de Certeau's phrase. As de Certeau ‘walks' the city of New York and collapses his view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center to the ground level, he suggests that the city is unable to see itself from the ground (de Certeau 1984: 91):

The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space.

In the texturology of Berlin, undocumented Vietnamese immigrants continue to be on the move and to juggle their risk. That is, their choice of risk as mobility does not end when the immigrants reach their destination, but both the risk and the movement remains a reality for them. As expressed in the excerpted narratives, the Ukraine forests remain present in Berlin's undocumented Vietnamese ecology through the immigrants’ memories and emotions. I argue that the deep forests of Eastern Europe are intimately connected with metropolis Berlin, and are even integrated into the Berlin scapes through the bodies and experiences of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants, who keep the deep forests in their psyche. The deep forests provide the space for the immigrants to move between legality to illegality, between ‘tourists’ or ‘students' to migrants, between prospect and (albeit risky and uncertain) reality. As the deep forests are laden with risks
and serve as the most crucial (underground) point in their unauthorized passage, this space enables not just the Vietnamese immigrants - but also risk - to migrate across borders, temporalities, and spatialities. The deep forests are an important part of the actor network (Robbins 2007) in the political ecology of undocumented migration discussed in this thesis.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have looked at the Vietnamese undocumented immigrants in Berlin and their choice of risk as mobility through their perception of risk, their migration experiences, and their recollection and retrospective evaluation of risk. I trace risk in three distinct moments of immigration that unfold in three locations: preparation in Vietnam, en route via Eastern European countries, and at arrival in Berlin. These moments flow in an integral continuum and show the fluidity of migration and transnational nature of risk through the linkage between temporality and spatiality, and between perception, experiences, and memories. By putting relevant theories in conversation with my fieldwork and oral histories, I follow the call to pay attention to and to integrate the non-humans in research on urban spaces. I embrace the departure from the sacrosanct separation of nature and society as seen in various bodies of scholarship of late, including political ecology and urban studies. I hope that in some way, the thesis is a response to political ecology through ethnography and oral history narratives.

Through the immigrants' perception of risk prior to departure, I show that risk is ‘a collective construct’ (Douglas & Wildavsky1982) whose perception evolves around social factors (Douglas 1985) and that risk taking involve “complicated decisions" (Chibnik 2011:61). Building from the concepts of ‘illegality as risk’ (Castañeda 2009) and ‘choice as belonging’ (Gammeltoft 2014), I argue that risk is a form of belonging for undocumented Vietnamese immigrants because of the familial sentiments attached to risk taking. Following the call for paying attention to and integration of the non-human in urban spaces, I show that risk is an inherent factor in the Vietnamese immigration
experiences, for formal/documentated and informal/undocumented migration channels alike. The undocumented immigrants, however, perceive and articulate risk as their means to migrate. They are more susceptible to risk because of their economic constraints (Schwenkel 2013). As undocumented Vietnamese in Berlin travel through socialist or former socialist nations, their experiences flow in the vein of “socialist mobilities” (Schwenkel 2014) that are an important but understudied part of Vietnamese migration.

Moving from perception to experience, the undocumented immigrants gain a much more intimate relationship with risk en route and post-migration and have a much more realistic perception of it. Heeding the call to include non-human actors in recent scholarships, I explore the relationship between the immigrants and the built and ecological environments through which the undocumented Vietnamese have migrated and lived. In particular, I argue that the migration route remains present post-migration, that the Ukraine deep forests remain real in the everyday life of undocumented Vietnamese in Berlin. Risk therefore remains ‘real’ for the immigrants, not only because of the memory of risk encountered en route to Berlin, but also because of the risk they face in Berlin.

With their retrospective perception of risk, the immigrants continue to juggle risk and to be on the move to meet the demands of their work and life situations. They aspire toward being a part of the city and actively embrace risk as a means to claim their “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996). Through active determination, they continue to take risk to challenge the Berlin government’s refusal to grant them asylum and delay deportation. Besides the risk associated with their lack of legal status, undocumented immigrants face
the risk of being interpolated by their ethnic association in the face of ethnic stigma and intra-ethnic tensions. The undocumented immigrants' watchful and vulnerable access to public space complicates and limits the notion of risk as mobility. With this duality of risk in legal limbo, undocumented Vietnamese immigrants participate in the Berlin's urban space, “a texturology in which extremes coincide” (de Certeau 1984) and continue to be on the move while juggling their risk, at once “squatting” (Leung 1992-1998; Leung & Sturken 2005) and moving. Their choice of risk as mobility and their movement continue long after they have reached their desired destination.

By way of conclusion, I further grapple with the concept of risk in the urban space from an urban political ecological viewpoint. How can we understand risk more fully as a social collective construct within the actor networks of urban ecology? What are some productive ways to think about the human bodies as not independent entities but a part of the larger landscape? In the experiences of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants discussed in this thesis, the human bodies are intimately connected to the environment, most evidently so during the most crucial part of the immigration: the passage through the deep Ukraine forests. What other questions can I ask to get at the radical intimacy between risky spaces and human bodies moving through them? What does political ecology look like in undocumented Vietnamese spaces in Berlin, via Ukraine and Warsaw? In which other ways can we gain a better understanding of the temporality of risk: prior to experiences of risk, in the moment of risk, after the risk, and in this case, continued risk? If risk is treated as an accepted fact while vulnerability as a conception, how would the narrative look differently if I were to use ‘vulnerability as mobility’
instead of ‘risk as mobility’? Who are the winners and losers in the Vietnamese undocumented migration network? I hope to explore these questions through follow-up fieldwork in the future and in my dissertation.
Works Cited


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