

Narratives of Vietnamese Polish People: Racialized Inflexibilities in Globalized Warsaw

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Abstract

Since the fall of communism in 1989 and the resultant opening of Polish borders, new groups with no historical residence in Poland have established populations in this country, the largest of these being the Vietnamese community. As such, there is at least one generation of people of Vietnamese descent who have grown up in a country which has only recently become host to migrants from Asia and Africa and in which even historical minority groups are low in numbers. In this research, I consider: what do the narratives of Vietnamese Polish people say about Poland and identity in Poland? I do this by exploring narratives of identity, belonging, and exclusion in several semi-structured interviews I conducted in the summer of 2014 in Warsaw with people of Vietnamese descent who were either born in Poland or immigrated to Poland as children at age twelve or younger. I find that these narratives speak to these persons' experiences as tightly bound up in Poland's post-socialist transformation. I find that they also point to the essentialization and inflexibility of what "Polish" and "Vietnamese" mean in this context, and I propose that this manifests in the racialized marking of Vietnamese bodies in Poland. This notion suggests that race and whiteness matter in contemporary Poland, often portrayed as one of the most homogeneous countries in terms of descent by academic and public discourse. These findings sit upon a tension inherent to globalization in Poland: that Poland's triumphant "return to Europe" and new migrant populations are coupled in what has materially comprised Poland since 1989. Decentering the notion of "Poland" in this manner points yields insight into how power operates in Poland, Eastern Europe, and a broader global context.

Keywords: Poland, identity, narrative

1. Introduction

One Saturday in Warsaw in the summer of 2014, several guests visited my grandmother's house for dinner. One guest who has lived between the United Kingdom and Poland for almost a decade entertained the others with stories about life in the UK. This guest spoke jovially about her exposure to so many different "cultures," the "Africans" she has seen working in hospitals, an "Arab Market" she would like to visit, and visiting a synagogue. She is quite adaptable among many different cultures, she said. Yet, she said, she likes it in Poland, "because after all, *to nasi*": in English, these our own [people].

I was brought up to believe in such a Poland and that talking about Poland meant talking about one group of people and none other. Indeed, a picture persists of Poland as one of the most homogenous countries in popular and academic discourse alike.¹ According to the most recent Polish census in 2011, 97% of the population is of Polish "national-ethnic" identity, with 95% listing this as their only national-ethnic identity.² Yet within this seeming homogeneity of descent exist several "minority" groups, not least among them the Vietnamese community. With the fall of communism in 1989 and the resultant opening of borders, new groups with no historical residence in Poland have established populations in Poland. The largest of these communities is the Vietnamese community.³ The numbers for this group are at best fuzzy and are comprised by a wide range of counts. According to the 2011 Census, only a few

thousand people of Vietnamese identity reside in Poland.⁴ According to another measure, however, the number of people of Vietnamese descent living in Warsaw legally is 13,000; yet another measure in 2007 found that around twice as many people of Vietnamese descent lives in Poland without authorization, with between 25 to 35,000 Vietnamese immigrants in total living in Poland.⁵ Anecdotal estimates of people of Vietnamese descent living in Poland also number in the tens of thousands, regarding both authorized and unauthorized residents. Most people of Vietnamese descent in Poland live in Warsaw, which is home to a quarter of all “foreigners” (non-citizens) in Poland; however, in 2004, “foreigners” composed only 1.5% of Warsaw’s population.⁶

Vietnamese people first began immigrating to Poland in the 1960s and 1970s as students, according to agreements of cultural exchange and relationship between the communist Polish and Vietnamese governments. This flow of people was rather small, with only 200 Vietnamese people coming to Poland every year until the beginning of the 1980s. These first migrants, through their cultural capital in Poland, likely originated the migration networks which then led to much heavier volumes of “economic” migration from Vietnam to Poland, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁷ Thus, the Vietnamese community has been present in Poland for at least fifty years, with more substantial numbers for at least the last thirty years. As such, Poland is currently home to at least one generation of young Vietnamese people who have grown up in Poland; moreover, there is at least one generation of people of Vietnamese descent who have grown up in a country which has only recently become host to migrants from Asia and Africa, and in which even historical minority groups are low in numbers.

In this paper, I ask: what do the narratives of Vietnamese Polish people say about Poland and identity in Poland? In doing so, I consider the lived experience of people of Vietnamese descent who were either born in Poland or immigrated to Poland as children (in this paper, those who immigrated at age twelve or younger). I consider narratives collected through several life history/semi-structured interviews I conducted with such persons in Warsaw, home to large portion of people of Vietnamese descent living in Poland, during the summer of 2014. I find that these narratives speak to lived experience embedded in Poland as a site of globalization. Yet in exploring how the discourse of identity, I find that the categories of “Polish” and “Vietnamese” are inflexible in meaning. This inflexibility relates to the racialized marking of Vietnamese bodies in Poland. I propose that race and whiteness matter in Poland in a way which allows Poland to assert its “Europeanness” in a time of increased mobility and interconnection.

2. Methodology

This work attempts to make sense of my fieldwork in Warsaw, Poland’s capital city and home to a high density of Vietnamese people, over six weeks in July and August 2014. I completed a series of interviews with people of Vietnamese descent who had spent most of their lives in Poland. My participants included people who themselves were immigrants, as well as people who were born in Poland. Participants were either current students or were employed, several in entrepreneurial/ family enterprises, and most were currently of a middle class economic position. Ages ranged from 18 to 26. I spoke with nine women and nine men of Vietnamese descent in a total of 22 interviews. I obtained informed consent from all participants, and all participants but one agreed to have interviews audio recorded. Interviews were completed in public spaces such as cafes and parks, generally in the center, north, and south of Warsaw. I attempted to employ a life history method within a semi-structured framework which concerned general life experiences as well as more pointed questions about identity and related themes. Interviews lasted from about 30 minutes to three hours, and were most often conducted in Polish, though some participants preferred English. My analysis of interview data draws on transcripts and notes I created on the basis of the interview data, as well as reference back to original audio data when necessary; I did not code data. I also wrote field notes on most days of my stay regarding aspects of my life as a transient resident of the city: public transportation, watching television, walking through Warsaw’s Central District, national and religious holidays, cultural events in the city, and interactions with my own family members.

I first gained contacts with the help of an acquaintance in the United States who is of Vietnamese descent and had lived in Warsaw from a very young age, as well as a cousin of mine who lives in Warsaw. I then relied on the snowball method. Another contact also directed me to a Facebook page for Vietnamese people in Warsaw and advised me to reach out to people who were members of this page. I did so, and for every few messages that received no reply, someone expressed interest or agreed to participate. The interviews I had with participants I met in this way were as rich as any of the other interviews, and from these contacts I also gained further contacts. Lastly, another non-Vietnamese contact put me in touch with friends of his who are of Vietnamese descent. Whenever I reached out to a person (always in writing), I did my best to answer questions about the study and possible topics of conversation while making clear participants’ freedom to discuss whatever they would like to talk about. I also shared my consent form as requested. Not all people I contacted or whom participants and others contacted on my behalf wanted to participate

in the study, but most did. Those who chose not to participate either could not because they were traveling or not in Warsaw, preferred not to take part in a study about identity, or did not specify why they preferred not to take part. I am indebted to particular participants who invested much energy in finding further contacts and persuading individuals in their networks to take part in the study. As such, I do not pretend to think that the individuals with whom I spoke constitute a representative sample of all people of Vietnamese descent in Warsaw, and indeed many of the participants were connected to each other, as friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, children of parents' friends, neighbors, and classmates. I note also that six weeks is an extremely short length of time in which to undertake work even remotely ethnographic in nature. I do not claim to know anything about the personal lives of the participants in this study beyond what they told me, or what friends and acquaintances of theirs told me about them. All participant names which appear within this thesis are pseudonyms which correspond to the language of the name that each participant used when interacting with me.

Working within an interpretive framework,⁸ I also understand that my role in this study is not just as researcher but also as research instrument, as co-creator of data, and as a body now performing analysis in a place far removed from the research context. I also understand this role as necessarily related to my own identity as a daughter of two Polish immigrants, who left Warsaw for the United States around the time of the fall of communism (my father in 1988 and my mother in 1992), and the ambiguity of my own perceived identity when in Poland. I have traveled to Warsaw several times for family visits; the last time I had visited was six years ago.

3. Narrating inclusion beyond the imagined community

The very beginnings of this project had their basis in the question: how do people of Vietnamese descent in Poland identify, and how are they included/excluded? Narratives can be a powerful tool through which to explore identity through themes of belonging and not belonging, inclusion and exclusion. Merje Kuus points out that studies of identity, even when conscious of the socially constructed nature of identity or taking part in deconstruction, can simultaneously essentialize, viewing certain aspects of identity as “core elements.”⁹ An alternative to this circularity, according to Kuus, is to focus on the performativity of identity; in other words, instead of studying the roots of identity, one may study how “subjects themselves are constituted through practices operating in the name of their ‘identity.’”¹⁰ The act of talking and telling stories about oneself in an interview is such a practice in which identity is expressed and performed. Nira Yuval-Davis thinks of identities *as* narratives: “Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not).”¹¹ Yuval-Davis also notes that “constructions of belonging, however, cannot and should not be seen as merely cognitive stories. They reflect emotional investments and desire for attachments” rather than stable states of identity.¹²

Narratives about national holidays like the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, which occurred during my fieldwork, provided an entry point into questions of inclusion and exclusion. I met Kasia, who studies in the U.S. but comes home during the summer, some time after the holiday, and we talked about it. I asked her whether she celebrated it. She said she walked down Nowy Świat, the street leading down to Warsaw's Old City (and a popular site of tourist and nightlife activity), where displays were erected commemorating the anniversary: “I read something, and I thought that was enough.” Honestly, she said, it was not an important event to her, but if a friend who was very passionate about it asked her she would say that she was. She came to nearby Krasieński Park, which was one of the sites of battle during the Uprising: “you could say that I prayed but I just stood there in silence for some time and walked away.” I asked Kasia whether the Uprising was part of her history. She replied:

I am thankful there are people who fought for this country but I don't feel that attached to it 'cause my my ancestors were not here and the difference between me and my friends that their grandparents or great-grandparents were fighting for their country while mine were fighting for another country...this is funny 'cause like my dad told me that some people from Poland were sent to part of the American army [...] to fight Vietnam during the war when everything was very complicated.¹³

Thinking about the narrative as a means of communicating identity, Kasia's identity might seem quite disconnected from Poland. Kasia notes that her predecessors did not live in Poland and did not fight for Poland, and as such her attachment to Poland, notwithstanding her friendships with “majority” Polish people and even her thankfulness “that people fought for this country,” is weak. Such a reading would define Poland as an Andersonian “imagined community,”¹⁴ a nation composed of those who fought for the country and their descendants. The situation is further complicated when she considers the potential complicity of Poland in fighting Vietnam. In such a reading of this narrative, one might see Kasia as totally excluded from Poland as “imagined community” with no hope of ever joining

no matter her personal disposition, as her grandparents fought for Vietnam and not for Poland and thus have sealed her fate.

In her narrative of how she spent the holiday, however, Kasia's exclusion is not so absolute. She participated: she read displays about the holiday in a public space of commemoration, and then she stood in silence at the park-turned-battleground-turned park. Kasia exists outside of the vision of Poland as the thing won and made possible through the struggle of Polish people to overthrow their occupiers which is promulgated in the remembrance of the Uprising, yet materially participated in the performance of this vision; furthermore, she is glad people fought for this country, and her very existence and participation in material life in Poland in its current time and space suggests the possibility of re-framing Poland as an entity in which Kasia is included. This Poland is Kasia's birthplace and home. Kasia was born in Warsaw to immigrant parents: Kasia's father first came to Poland to start his university studies and her mother to work. They currently work in "Asian" shopping centers (so-called by Varsovians) near Warsaw. Kasia is the middle child in between two siblings. While she and her older sister study abroad, they grew up in Poland. Kasia says that her parents see Vietnam as their home, but they want to stay in Poland; in this vein of thought (and in seeming contradiction with her thoughts above) Kasia says: "I see my home as Poland. If I were to choose a place to come back to I would choose Poland."¹⁵

The Poland which emerges in participant narratives is also one in which immigrants and their descendants are centered. Centering these experiences points to the role of the Vietnamese in Poland in the material changes that have happened in Poland since the formal end of communism in 1989. The establishment of the free market and transition to democracy did not just "happen." These were made material by human beings. In the early 1990s, while "the grand narrative of political transition was evolving," on the ground, the transition was being made real through the actions of the "real *makers* of urban change: market sellers, passengers of Eurolines buses, budding entrepreneurs."¹⁶ The parents of many participants acted as such "makers." A majority of the parents of participants were involved in the "petty trading" which became so prominent in immediately post-1989 Poland. Many did so in the *Stadion*, or the Tenth Anniversary Stadium, an earth stadium situated on the right bank of the Vistula River in Warsaw which became the site of one of Europe's largest open-air markets. Originating alongside street vending at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, it acted as "a basic source of otherwise unavailable goods" in newly free-market Poland.¹⁷ This market was a major place of employment of the migrants who came to Poland after 1989, especially from the former USSR and Asia, and many participants had memories of their parents working there. Thus it would seem that the open-air markets acted as a means of life, both for buyers and sellers, and were an important part of Poland's accession to the free market. As evidenced by their narratives, participants and their parents also acted as "makers" of post-1989 globalization through the very act of immigration. Participants and their family members individually took part in and thus helped shape the migration networks from Vietnam to Poland which originated in the socialist student exchanges and expanded post-1989: to make a somewhat obvious point, in the act of immigration and family sponsorship, they established a population of people of Vietnamese descent in Poland, crossed borders in doing so, and thus materially *created* Poland as a country that is home to Vietnamese people. If globalization is the "intensification of global interconnectedness, suggesting a world full of movement and mixture, contact and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange,"¹⁸ then the very presence of people of Vietnamese descent in Poland may thus constitute globalization and Poland as a globalized place.

4. Mapping the discourse of identification: "One can't describe oneself, really"

Notwithstanding narrations of inclusion in Poland, participant narratives also indicate that a hyphenated "Vietnamese Polish" identity does not exist. A person who has a hyphenated identity "can be included in a national or ethnic collectivity while continuing to preserve legitimately membership in another one"¹⁹; participant narratives instead suggest that participants conceptualize their identities as essentially Vietnamese. This is evidenced through analysis of the language used by participants specifically referencing identity.

When asked how she identified, Zosia, a university student, replied, "I wouldn't say I am a Polish woman. But I would also not say that I am a Vietnamese woman! One can't describe oneself, really."²⁰ This question elicited a range of responses when I posed it to other participants. Some people identified as half Vietnamese and half Polish, others as Vietnamese people living in Poland, some as nothing in particular, some as having felt Polish previously but now feeling more Vietnamese, and some as more Polish since they've gotten their citizenship. Strikingly, such identifications often positioned Vietnamese and Polish identity as polar and even oppositional at times. Once I realized this, I began to ask participants whether one could be fully Polish and fully Vietnamese. Often the answer was no. If yes, this was often in the sense of operating in different ways based on "cultural" context, but still with a certain

irreconcilability—a fixed difference—assigned to Vietnamese and Polish identity. No one explicitly identified as Vietnamese Polish.

Before I entered the field, while translating my consent form to Polish, while communicating with contacts, and even in the first stages of my fieldwork, I pondered how to linguistically accommodate the variety of ways I thought people might identify. Especially before I entered the field, I was committed to the idea of the existence of people who were not “ethnically” Polish but identified as Polish. However, to internalize this notion in my speech proved more difficult for me than I could have imagined, reflecting my own biases as a person taught to believe that there is only one kind of Polish person, and, in turn, that to speak of Polish people is to speak of a particular group of people and not others. As such, in many of the interviews I struggled between the language of “*Polacy*” (Polish people) and “*Wietnamczycy*” (Vietnamese people), which assumed a binary form of relationship between these groups without a clear definition of the nature of either, and talking about “ethnically Polish people,” to allow for the existence of non-ethnically Polish people. Yet whenever I played with language that at the time I envisioned as more inclusive, it felt forced, was hardly if ever taken up by the participant with whom I was speaking, and seemed to be interpreted more as a joke than as a serious attempt to be inclusive. More often than not, I settled on the language which implicitly distinguishes between “*Polacy*” and “*Wietnamczycy*” as definitively separate categories. Yet my struggle to ask questions in language that allowed for a range of identity possibilities remained in my head, unless I voiced my difficulty out loud. No one challenged me in using the words “*Polacy*” and “*Wietnamczycy*” as implicitly separate categories or told me this was problematic; in fact, this binary was used without any apparent thought by most, if not all, of the people I interviewed throughout our conversations.

To stop, think, and talk about majority Polish people as “ethnic” is not only linguistically cumbersome; it is not *imagined* as a choice in language to make by the participants of this study. Similarly, a hyphenated Vietnamese Polish identity does not seem to exist in this context. There are only “*Polacy*” and “*Wietnamczycy*.” “*Polacy*,” in the binary, generally indicated people who are not Vietnamese; “*Wietnamczycy*” indicated people who are not Polish. This binary creates no space for identities that are both Polish and Vietnamese to any extent. To think back to Zosia’s comment that “one can’t describe oneself, really”: the language through which Zosia *would* be able to describe herself except as “not a Polish woman” or “not a Vietnamese woman” does not exist. In a sense, the “Vietnamese Polish” do not discursively exist, even in the ways in which people who could identify as such talk about themselves.

Intriguingly, even when participants did subvert the Polish/Vietnamese identity binary, what is “Polish” and what is “Vietnamese” often took on essential qualities. For example, the concept of *spolszczenie*, or being “polonized,” came up in several conversations. Long, an entrepreneur who would attend graduate school shortly, once commented that lots of people do feel Polish even though they have immigrant parents. “They don’t know [Vietnamese] culture, they speak poorly...I know such people like this, polonized. They have nothing to do with Vietnam.” While this concept connotes change or hybridization, it simultaneously emphasizes distinction. A person may come to identify as Polish, but what comprises “Vietnamese” and “Polish” does not change. Furthermore, in the case of someone who is *spolszczona*, the implicit assumption is that this person has been not quite changed, but re-shaped from an original, underlying Vietnamese form or identity, and indeed is not *really* Polish, even if they “have nothing to do with Vietnam.”

Additionally, while the lives of Varsovians of Vietnamese descent are part of an arc of particular histories that have made Warsaw and Poland what they are today, strikingly, when it came to saying who they *are*, most participants would not say that they *were* Poles. Instead, they often talked about *feeling* Polish: a distinction between being and feeling came into play.

In these narratives, contemporary Poland and Warsaw in particular thus emerge as spaces in which “Polish” and “Vietnamese” have essential meanings, in which a hyphenated “Vietnamese Polish” group identity is not discursively possible, and in which people have essential identities. Paradoxically, it seems, while borders have “opened,” the sense of what particular identities mean or entail is quite inflexible.

5. Embodiment of essentialized identity

Finally, participant narratives included a significant amount of “body talk”: stories in which one’s embodiment matters. As Theo Hollander and Bani Gill note, “embodiment suggests that it is through our bodies that we interpret the world around us. The body is a social vessel through which the world is experienced and made meaningful and an object that shapes the world.”²¹ These authors also note that “we are not always aware of our embodiment, and neither is embodiment always experienced in the same way.”²² Paying attention to embodiment in participant narratives demonstrates that the essentializations described above are felt at the level of the body.

I interviewed two friends, Dorota and Celina, together, and I include several excerpts from our conversation below as they illustrate this theme particularly well. Dorota is starting university studies this year, and Celina is also a student. Speaking about how she is perceived, Dorota said: “Yeah, I won’t escape that, right, I don’t look like a *Polka* [Polish woman].” Several participants expressed similar sentiments, not only that their bodies were different from those of majority Polish people, but also that these bodies did not look like “Polish” bodies. This suggests that Polish people are only embodied in certain bodies.

In the same conversation, I asked Dorota whether she feels any discrimination in Poland, and she answered as follows.

Actually I feel better as a *Wietnamka* [Vietnamese woman] living here [...] Yes because I always have the feeling that they always yield to me [...] If I make a mistake or something then they think, ok, this a *Wietnamka*, so we can forgive her something, right, I always feel, you know, this kind of...It’s light, in my opinion. Precisely, it’s better. Because people are interested in that which is different. Once there was a fashion for Asian beauty, too.²³

It is one thing that participants perceive themselves to be different from people around them. It is another thing for participants to say that they do not look like Polish people. It is yet another for participants to talk about themselves as being “different,” while certain kinds of bodies are assumed to be “normal.” Dorota describes the way in which she embodies certain essential traits that mark her as different, simply because her body is read by other Polish people as Vietnamese. “Ok, this a *Wietnamka*, so we can forgive her something”: in such a moment, Dorota is read as not Polish. She is also read as not “normal,” not expected to be familiar with certain rules of conduct, seemingly of a cultural/behavioral nature. This is striking as Dorota was born and raised in Poland, speaks Polish as a native speaker, and is otherwise “integrated” into mainstream Polish society. Dorota’s narrative, as do other participant narratives, suggests that certain bodies embody an essential normality in Poland, while others embody essential difference/deviance. As Dorota’s narrative suggests, this embodiment of difference can seem neutral or even beneficial at times, but it can also suddenly become a point of contention. For example, many participants described the experience of being bullied in elementary school, being set apart by Polish classmates by means of slurs like “slant eyes” and “yellow-skin” which are predicated on perceptions of the body. Conversely, those who are Polish by descent, in their embodiment of normality as assumed both by members of this group and those rendered different by it, do not experience problematization of their identity as such.

Additionally, participant narratives suggest that Vietnamese bodies are perceived not only as essentially “different” by default, but also as essentially “foreign.” Several participants, among them people who were born and raised only in Poland, described the surprise they have observed among majority Polish people in public spaces, such as a notary’s office or on a city bus, when they speak Polish. Again, the embodiment of foreignness can appear to be neutral, but can easily become a point of contention. My conversation with Dorota and Celina points to this.

Dorota: Yeah, I won’t escape that, right, I don’t look like a *Polka* [...] But when I start to speak Polish in the bus then automatically people are more tolerant for me...Because this is how it is, that if you speak in your own, you know, they are not so tolerant. But if you start speaking Polish then they feel that we are respecting this, that we are living in their country, so we are learning in their language. Yeah. This is how it should be.

EP: And in what, in what way does this tolerance reveal itself? What does it mean, that—

Dorota: Um, that they are respecting us for this, that we are respecting their country, because we live here and we learn in their languages. Because some arrive and don’t speak it at all. They just don’t want to.

EP: Do you think that such people are somehow less respected?

Dorota: I think so.

Celina: Yes.

Dorota: Because then automatically still you are in your culture, you change your culture and still you behave as if you were in that one, so there is a difference and people don’t respect this too much. You should be open.

EP: And in such a case as, I don’t know, as you said on the bus, when one speaks in either Vietnamese or Polish, I don’t know, then, specifically, how would you say that people behave differently? What would that look like?

Dorota: Well for sure they would smile more! [Giggles]

Celina: Yes. Older ladies, older ladies for example, if they see, I don’t know I will say...for example, I will help her validate her ticket, and then she will say that she thanks me very much and I say, “oh, don’t mention it, you’re welcome!” and she hears that accent—at once she smiles more cheerfully or something. And if nothing, for example if someone in this Vietnamese Polish [way of speaking], then it will just be “thank you,” right? Well, a less normal, less friendly one.

Dorota: Yes and this does not change the fact that people still are surprised that we speak Polish.

EP: Yes? Does this happen often?

Dorota: Yeah, sometimes it happens, they don't say so but one can see this.

Celina: Often this is the beginning of a conversation. Yes yes.

Dorota: Yes, so, how is it so that you speak Polish so well? Yup. One time I was standing at a bus stop. This granny chatted me up, where to go to and so on and I told her, and she [in an overly sweet voice]: oh how beautifully you speak Polish, my child, something!

Celina: Yes... in the grocery store. Yes, always it's there that: oh wow, you have such a clean—such a clean accent, better than some Poles! And I: thank you very much! And then: and you were born here? And so on the conversation goes.²⁴

Dorota's comment that "we are respecting their country, because we live here and we learn in their languages" is also somewhat unexpected as it unilaterally indexes Poland and the Polish as hosts and Vietnamese people as guests or visitors, including Dorota, who was born and raised in Poland. It is even quite in line with the comments of majority Polish people who are surprised that Dorota or Celina, both of whom embody difference, can speak Polish. I then asked whether such questions were bothersome. They answered no, but Celina said, "If someone asks *too* much, then yes. If goes in rather deep, then yes." Dorota then said:

I actually had such a situation. I was sitting at a bus stop and some geezer comes up to me and starts asking, normally, very politely and whatever, what do your parents do here, why are your parents here, why did you come here and something something, seemingly nice and everything, I am answering him, and he apparently is some politician [...] And suddenly comes some bus and he starts yelling at the top of his lungs, to—excuse me, please—"get the fuck out of this country, because here there is no work for you all" or something like that [...] Yes and I was surprised, it was going so normally, as if we were talking like now, and suddenly, at the end, the bus came, get the fuck out of this country. And I, such an: oh God. I was really surprised...²⁵

Dorota's experience with the politician demonstrates that the way in which she experiences her embodiment and even talks about it are shaped by how a dominant group, namely the Polish majority, relates to people of Vietnamese descent and marks such people as essentially different from what is Polish.

6. Free market, fixed identities

Participant narratives point to a seeming paradox: globalized, post-1989 Poland is also a Poland in which the contours of identity have hardened. This paradox may be analyzed through the lens of standpoint theory, which draws attention to the ways in which power shapes the contours of identity.²⁶ Through the lens of standpoint theory, "when it is said that people belong to a particular gender, or race, or class or nation, that they belong to a particular age-group, kinship group or a certain profession, what is being talked about are social and economic locations, which, at each historical moment, have particular implications *vis-à-vis* the grids of power relations in society."²⁷ Furthermore, in this view, identity groups are shaped by power, not the result of individual choice: "it is common location within hierarchical power relations that creates groups, not the results of collective decision making of the individuals within the groups."²⁸ Patricia Hill Collins also points towards the establishment of formal categories of difference as a manifestation of power: "race, gender, social class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality are not descriptive categories of identity applied to individuals. Instead, these elements of social structure emerge as fundamental devices that foster inequality resulting in groups."²⁹ Groups are consequently, in some way, constructed in inequality.

Analysis of the discourse of identification and experiences of embodiment in participant narratives point to the construction of a "Vietnamese" standpoint rather than a "Vietnamese Polish" standpoint in Poland. Standpoint theory suggests that the discursive absence of a hyphenated "Vietnamese Polish" group identity is not an accident or a choice, but reflective of the asymmetrical power relations which imbue the discourse of participant narratives and shape the parameters of identification. This is also true of the way in which Vietnamese bodies are read as essentially foreign and not Polish. If the standpoint that participants and their immigrant parents occupy together is shaped by "shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power"³⁰, it seems that power lies with those identified as Polish by "blood." The Polish majority constructs itself as "normal" through the perpetual "difference" and "foreignness" of those of immigrant descent, as reflected in the experiences of participants and the discourse of their narratives. This pattern is reproduced even in mainstream academic and policy discourse with regard to the Vietnamese in Poland. The vast majority of this work treats such persons exclusively as immigrants and fails to consider the experiences of

people of Vietnamese descent who were born and raised in Poland.³¹ Even studies of children of Vietnamese descent in Polish schools ascribe an unexamined foreignness to these children.³²

This construction of a “normal” kind of Polishness, distinct from everything “Vietnamese,” is racialized. As Vilna Bashi notes, “one is not allowed to be without a race in a racialized society. Race is a sociocultural hierarchy, and racial categories are social spaces, or positions, that are carved out of that racial hierarchy.”³³ Dorota’s anecdotes about the politician as well as the “granny” suggest a lack of choice in identity as structured in the racialization of her body. The essentialization of Vietnamese identities in Poland is part and parcel of this racialization, as “racist discourse that universalizes negative value across a group” has its impact through essentialization.³⁴ If one cannot be without a race in a racialized society, this would also suggest that whiteness—as that which is embodied by the majority of people in Poland, orders difference, structures the curiosity of grannies and politicians, and yet is not a subject of curiosity, interrogation, or problematization—matters in “homogenous” Poland.

Such conclusions may seem surprising, if only with regard to the small percentage of the Polish population made up by Vietnamese people who live in Poland—and with regard to the national-ethnic identity of 95% of the general population being Polish. One may even argue, as Maciej Ząbek does, that “a certain conflict is written into the situation of migration itself, and the assumption that groups with different traditions and interests can always coexist harmoniously is a utopian belief.”³⁵ With regard to the case of people of African descent in Poland, Ząbek notes that “living abroad and the process of adaptation is a difficult experience for anyone. In the case of black immigrants to Poland, it is made more difficult by the fact that their distinctive skin color marks them as foreign in a relatively permanent way, making integration more difficult.”³⁶ Ząbek suggests interactions between host and migrant (and migrants’ children) necessarily have friction to them; if globalization entails that “more peoples and cultures [are] cast into intense and immediate contact with each other,”³⁷ is it not inevitable that these points of contact could be abrasive? Perhaps these are initial frictions that will fade with time as people grow more “tolerant?”

I would like to note Ząbek’s assumption in the above statement that difference through skin color, culture, etc. matters without question of whether and how “difference” may be constructed, and why it is that certain differences matter more than others. Concurrently, this statement is upheld by the assumption that Vietnamese and Polish people interact as two groups who have never before encountered “difference” like in the present encounter. The related assumption that Polish people are a unified and monolithic entity is also inherent to the above argument. The concept of necessary friction between the Vietnamese and the Polish assumes in many ways two internally unified, historically isolated groups interacting with each other and learning about difference. These assumptions can be problematized if we realize that difference has mattered in Poland much longer than people of Vietnamese descent have lived in Poland. A historical lens on Poland demonstrates the marginalization of those groups today formally recognized as Poland’s “ethnic and national minorities.”³⁸ As Agnieszka Pasięka demonstrates, the norm of Polish ethnic identity as Polish identity is so deeply entrenched in Polish society that even members of minority groups can fail to understand themselves as fully Polish.³⁹ The case of the Roma in particular demonstrates the importance and enforcement of “difference” in Poland and Eastern Europe at large: as Patricia Ahmed and others note, “classifications are external and exclusionary for the racialized ethnicity, Roma, while classifications are optional and inclusive for other ethnicities.”⁴⁰ Additionally, stereotypical and racist images of people externally grouped as Africans and Asians have been circulating in Poland and Eastern Europe for *centuries*⁴¹; such images have even been enshrined in popular Polish cultural texts. As such, the discrimination that people of Vietnamese descent encounter in Poland as well as hardened conceptions of difference between the Polish and the Vietnamese are not so much the necessary frictions in a meeting of strangers as a “return of the racist repressed.”⁴² Polishness could thus be seen as upheld through whiteness, a whiteness which provokes no interrogation in its dominance as that which is normal: “despite the variety of colors that are now present on the streets and screens of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, or Hungary, whiteness as a moral category has remained transparent. Its politics and aesthetics have remained beyond analysis.”⁴³

So what of this seeming contradiction, the free market that breeds fixed identities? I suggest that recognizing this contradiction as true in the lived experience of participants points to globalization as something inherently uneven: in terms of who has “access” to it, in the directionality of globalized flows, and the role of globalization in exacerbating unevenness.⁴⁴ In Eastern Europe, “counter to the idea of a unified world and deterritorialization cherished by the literature on globalization, the globalization processes bring back long suppressed civilization projects with regard to the region.”⁴⁵ Poland’s historic position as not quite the West and not quite the East⁴⁶ may mean that the racialization of Vietnamese Polish people and their essentialization as foreigners allows the discourse of Poland’s “return to Europe” since 1989⁴⁷ (and, implicitly, “civilization”) to persist. Anniko Imre observes that “East European nations’ unspoken insistence on their whiteness is one of the most effective and least recognized means of asserting their Europeaness” and allows discourses of imperialism and racism to proliferate without question.⁴⁸ This observation provides a fruitful line of inquiry into the ways that power structures and is structured by migration, race, and neoliberal globalization in Poland.

7. Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge, thank, and express my deep appreciation towards those who agreed to share parts of their lives with me as part of this study. I would also like to thank Susan Thomson for her guidance, support, patience, and care. My field research in Poland was funded by the Alumni Memorial Scholars program at Colgate University.

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