1. Introduction: The Transnational Politics of Vietnamese Identity

In February of 1999, a 15,000 strong rally against communism and human rights violations in Vietnam was held in Little Saigon, Orange County, California. Bolsa Avenue, the six-lane highway that runs the length of Little Saigon, was choked for hours with protesters waving the *co ba soc* or “three striped flag” of the defunct Republic of Vietnam (RVN) [South Vietnam] and chanting anti-Hanoi slogans. This demonstration, feted as the largest in the history of the post-1975 Vietnamese diaspora in the West, was sparked by the actions of a single person: Vietnamese American small businessman Tran Van Truong. Truong raised the ire of anticommunists in Little Saigon by hanging a portrait of Ho Chi Minh and the national flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in his video repair and rental store, located in a mall serving Orange County’s 200,000-strong Vietnamese American community. He told the local Anglophone press that since leaving Vietnam as a refugee in the late 1970s, he had made some four trips back there. Over the course of these visits, he said, he had perceived a significant improvement in the well being of his homeland, which he attributed to the nation’s current leadership (Wride and Sheppard 1999). Hence his decision to hang the flag and portrait.

I found out about these events while checking my email on the communal account in the guesthouse where I was staying at the time in Ho Chi Minh City. Articles taken from the Californian press had been bulk mailed, unsolicited, to random addresses in Vietnam by the diasporic political organisation Vietnam Insight. Opening the emails, I
found that the *L.A. Times* and the *Orange County Register* - both of which numbered several Vietnamese American journalists on their reporting staffs - had taken a sympathetic tone, praising the restraint of the protesters and their co-operation with the police in staging a largely peaceful protest. Truong, it seems, was the only one who got hurt. ¹ These articles by and large reproduced the interpretation, made by people interviewed on the streets, that the protests marked the affirmation and resurgence of an anticommmunist identity in the diaspora. Organisers stressed that the protests had been truly popular and cross-generational. The participation of young Vietnamese Americans, including celebrities from the diasporic music industry, was reported to have been particularly prominent (Wride and Sheppard 1999, Phan et al. 1999, 1999a, “Quan Cam tiep tuc…”).

Over the next few weeks, I followed reactions to these events and their fallout in the domestic newspapers available in Ho Chi Minh City, and discovered a very different interpretation. Quite contrary to the American reporters, journalists in Vietnam had read Truong’s actions to mean that there existed a groundswell of support for the contemporary regime in the diaspora. This element dares not declare itself, it was explained, for fear of the threats and violent actions of a small group of antistate extremists, most of whom are ex-military and ex-government personnel of the old regime. *Thanh Nien* reported how the Vietnamese embassy in the US had sought to step in to defend this embattled “loyal” diasporic subject’s right to pursue an extranational identification with the SRV (“Dai su quan Viet Nam…”), while *Saigon Giai Phong*

¹ Tran Van Truong was at one stage physically attacked by protesters on the street and had to be hospitalised with a heart condition.
proclaimed that the protesters had no support in an America which wanted to “forget the past” (“Ngói My muon quen di...”).

A Contested Transnational Space

What initially strike us about these events are the deep political divisions they reveal between the overseas Vietnamese and their homeland. Some twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon, Hanoi and diasporic anticommunists would appear to be symbolically fighting the war all over again in this battle of the flags. The protesters insist that the diaspora’s loyalties lie with the anticommunist project of the former RVN. Vietnamese state discourse, conversely, represents this Cold War political identity as an anachronism in an America that is no longer an enemy but a key partner in globalisation (the two nations having recently signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement). The only viable and legitimate Vietnamese national identity, the state claims, is that which is realised in the contemporary Vietnamese nation-state - one to which, it asserts, a “silent majority” of overseas Vietnamese is loyal.

On closer inspection, however, we might see past these immediate divisions to reflect on the fact that an interested and connected\(^2\) observer in Ho Chi Minh City should have been capable not only of following events occurring in far off Orange County, but of having access to both of the clashing sets of interpretations of them described above. As such an observer, I found myself situated in a media space that was constituted by the

\(^2\) Vietnam has over 113 000 registered Internet users. The number of actual users is probably far greater when one adds the customers of the Internet cafés which may be found in all large urban centres.
circulation of both diasporic and homeland texts. The feeling of participating in a transnational Vietnamese public sphere was particularly acute when I found myself sitting in Oshin, a grungy Japanese backpacker café in Ho Chi Minh City, debating the protests with a Vietnamese Canadian academic who was convinced that Tran Van Truong was “crazy”. But these events were salient not only for anthropologists and visiting Viet Kieu. For informed Saigonese also, distant happenings in an overseas Vietnamese community in California had intruded into everyday consciousness. For most of my Saigonese acquaintances, the protests simply confirmed what they already believed about the excessive and radical nature of politics in the diaspora. One young man pointed out to me that the protests proved the wisdom of the state’s cautious and “go slow” policy towards diasporic returnees. For their part, overseas Vietnamese, and in particular diasporic political organisations, were aware of the attention that the SRV media was paying to events in Little Saigon, and sought via emails and postings on diasporic websites to enter into a “dialogue” with domestic Vietnamese about the protests, or at least to provide a different point of view on them.

Despite a distinct lack of consensus about their meaning, the simultaneous surveillance of and production of knowledge about these events in both homeland and diasporic sites obliges us to conclude that the Truong protests were a discursive event that

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3 Viet Kieu can be roughly translated as “overseas Vietnamese”. Viet = Vietnamese, Kieu = Sino-Vietnamese for “bridge”. This term is applied by Vietnamese nationals to overseas Vietnamese, and often appropriated by overseas Vietnamese themselves when in Vietnam. It is less commonly used by speakers in diasporic contexts, who refer rather to “overseas Vietnamese” [Người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài/hai ngoại] or “Vietnamese refugees” [Người Việt tỵ nạn].
occurred in a *transnational* Vietnamese public space. This is a space that, to some extent at least, cuts across the political and national boundaries that divide Vietnamese at home and in the West. Certainly, the Truong protests show up the political divisions between the Vietnamese diaspora and homeland. They even become the occasion for an unprecedented intensification of nationalist affect in the diaspora. Equally, however, do they demonstrate the capacity of media and mobile subjects to thwart the power of national boundaries to contain the politics that properly belong to each “side” of this division. The homeland bleeds into the diaspora in the form of a refugee cum frequent flyer between Little Saigon and Ho Chi Minh City, who presents himself as the subject of a homeland-loyal Vietnamese “transnation” rather than that of an anticommunist, exile diaspora. Likewise, the diaspora bleeds into the homeland. This occurs in the form of emails sent by an anticommunist political organisation; but, more significantly, in the form of the incorporation of events in California into a media construction of “nationally significant events”. As a consequence, a national outrage at the affronts perpetrated against the SRV flag and a “loyal” transnational citizen in Little Saigon was experienced in Vietnam almost as keenly as if these affronts had happened on Vietnamese soil.

**The Anthropology of Transnationalism**

The Tran Van Truong incident is a transnational discursive event of a kind with which anthropologists are becoming increasingly familiar as they pursue the analysis of the cultural dimension of the world political-economic system. The controversy around Truong is symptomatic of the collapsing of space and time by capital (Harvey 1989), and the interconnecting of cultures via global flows of people, signs and objects (Hannerz
1989, Appadurai 1990), that we have come to associate with late or postmodernity. But where do such processes leave the nation? Contemporary anthropological perspectives on the nation orient us to it as a cultural product, and to nationalism as a cultural process of collective identity formation. In our understandings of the processes of nation formation, we have been used to thinking of the state’s capacity to mark national boundaries - limits within which a proper national territory, continuous history and essential communal identity can be established - as being key to the project of producing “normative” modern national cultures. The advent of transnational phenomena would appear however to threaten the possibility of demarcating such spaces. As Foster asks, “Can a collectivity imagine or be made to imagine itself as a bounded entity when its members are increasingly exposed to a ‘cosmopolitan cultural regime’ through media, travel, and encounters with migrants and refugees ... ?” (Foster 1991: 237). The “transnational turn” in contemporary social and cultural theory has arguably made the grand narratives of national belonging begin to seem somewhat outmoded. Analysis has focused instead on how globalisation erodes deep attachment to the nation-state and replaces it with a more flexible, mobile and cynical relation. These two modalities of national belonging are most frequently represented as being antagonistic or mutually exclusive. However, answering Foster’s question by simply announcing the demise of imagined national communities and the end of the sovereignty of the nation-state can hardly be sufficient. A more sophisticated understanding of the interaction between the national and the transnational, the local and the global, is required. The better anthropological approaches to late modernity offer, I would argue, the best chance of arriving at a nuanced, non-binaristic understanding of the relation between globalisation and localisation. Through multi-sited
ethnography, among other methodologies, anthropologists have been able to produce analyses of the complex processes by which the national and the transnational dialectically constitute each other, showing how global processes are equally likely to intensify local and national identities as they are to erase them. Let us make a brief survey of this literature.

Aihwa Ong begins her *Flexible Citizenship* by positioning her work as an intervention in dominant, sociological and geographical accounts of globalisation. Rejecting the totalising view of globalisation as economic rationality bereft of human subjectivity (as found for instance in Harvey 1989), she stresses the need to reintroduce agency and the production and negotiation of cultural meanings into accounts of global processes. This means embedding the practices and imaginings of the mobile subject into the political economy of globalisation. Ong distinguishes globalisation, in the sense of narrow corporate strategies (flexible accumulation, the global assembly line etc), from transnationality, “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space - which has been intensified under late capitalism” (Ong 1999: 4). As a social scientist, she says, she is interested in the economic rationality that produces transnational movements of people and capital. As an anthropologist, however, she is interested in the cultural logics, themselves embedded in the processes of capital accumulation, which make such movements “thinkable, practicable, and desirable” (ibid: 5).

A key debate within the transnationalism literature revolves around whether or not transnational phenomena signal the emergence of a postnational social imaginary, or whether they in fact continue to be subject to the hegemony of powerful national fields. While transmigrants may appear to challenge the territorial imperatives of the nation-
state in “practice”, it has been noted that they persist in speaking of their practices and identities in the language of territorialised nationalisms. For Appadurai, this is because “no idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interests of many groups in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilisations, and postnational identities” (Appadurai 1996: 166). For Glick Schiller et al., it is less a matter of idiomatics and more one of the fact that “transmigrants” are still “given and assert their identities, and seek or exercise legal and social rights within national structures that monopolise power and foster ideologies of identity” (Glick Schiller et al. 1992: 15). These latter theorists do not read the advent of the transnational social fields that they identify as signalling the demise of the nation-state, but rather as bringing into being new, deterritorialised forms of nation-state hegemony. Thus, on the one hand, cross-border practices and transnational relationships are seen to hold out the possibility of resistance in the face of the disciplining effects of capital and the nation-state. On the other, nation-states, rather than simply having had their sovereignty eroded by transnational processes, have reinvented themselves, articulating to capital in new ways and forging new, deterritorialised modalities of governmentality.

A key thrust of this anthropology has been to examine how the mobility of people and things enabled and encouraged by globalisation have stimulated the state to re-imagine itself and author new, “deterritorialised” (Glick Schiller et al 1992, 1994) and “flexible” (Ong and Nonini 1997, Ong 1999) strategies of governmentality. Confronted with a growing number of globally connected and internationally mobile subjects whose fluid and multiple social identifications can no longer be contained within a hegemonic, territorially bounded conception of “the nation”, the political leaderships of countries
with significant diasporic populations have accommodated this state of things in policy and styles of national self-representation. The deterritorialised nation-state extends forms of national belonging to those who have emigrated from it, despite the fact that they have taken out citizenship in and undergone social and cultural integration into second nations. This is a strategy increasingly pursued by developing nations attempting to use their first-world diasporic subjects to secure themselves a comparative advantage in the global marketplace. Through the diaspora-as-bridge, the nation-state seeks such things as access to hard currency (through remittances and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)), knowledge and technology transfers, entry into overseas markets, and even political influence in the host nations via ethnic community politics. Glick Schiller et al. (1994) have charted the way in which developing nations such as Haiti and the Philippines have sought to construct a deterritorialised national identity so as to offer social, cultural, market and even political citizenship to their diasporic populations. In such constructs, territoriality shifts from a literal to a symbolic sense, whereby Haitian communities in New York for instance can be considered to belong to a symbolic national territory that exceeds the physical borders of the nation. Jean Bertrand Aristide referred to Haitians abroad as the country’s Dizyèm Depatman-an or “Tenth Department”, Haiti being divided into nine administrative regions called “Departments” (Glick Schiller et al. 1994: 146). The concept of “Greater China” employs a similar sense of “ungrounded empire” (Ong and Nonini 1997, Yang 1999, Ong 1999).

The temptation in this literature is to read the unshackling of the imagined nation from its territorial referent as a sign that even the leaderships of nation-states are realising that, in this age of diasporas, territorial nationalism is an implausible fiction. They would
appear to be owning up to the imaginary nature of national communities and physical territories. These developments appear however to contradict much of what we have been accustomed to think about the role of the border and its function of excluding national otherness to enable the constitution of a proper national space. Tempting as it is to read such developments as steps along the road to a postnational world order (Appadurai 1996, Hannerz 1996), it seems to me that if such “nations unbound” are willing to submit the territorial currency sacred to the modernist nation-state to a certain amount of inflation, this is done precisely in order to “save the nation”, to consolidate its territories through development and modernisation, to make it competitive in the global order. Thus while deterritorialised conceptions of nation extend to absent subjects a national belonging once conferred only by the soil of the homeland, the trade-off is that they usually attempt to capture the transnational subjects thus given recognition for their own “mononational” agendas and ideologies of identity. Here homelands battle host nations for the loyalty/docility of diasporic subjects in order to channel their skills and capital into their own nation-building projects - projects typically formulated by local elites without consultation with these overseas populations. We might speak here of a kind of normative, state-sponsored transnationalism, an attempt by the state to shape and discipline unruly transnational practices.

Having theorised such hegemonic transnational fields, one is left with the problem of how to think agency and structure in transnational practices. Are the constituents of these deterritorialised nations docile or resistant transnational subjects? It might be argued that theorists of transnationalism have tended to privilege the ways in which mobile subjects have resisted localisation and disciplining by the state and capital.
Indeed, much of the literature has something of a celebratory tone, wherein guerrilla-like transnational practices subvert hegemonic nationalisms, opening up spaces for liberated postnational subjectivities (Smith and Guarnizo 1998: 23). While social science approaches tend to point the finger at cultural studies, such totalising emancipatory narratives often lie submerged in accounts offered by sociologists and anthropologists also. Transnationalisms, however, like any other everyday practices, are a mixture of agency and structure. Ong (1999) has addressed this issue by arguing that, rather than being unstructured, transnational flows are embedded within systems of governmentality, i.e. regimes of truth and power whose disciplinary effects condition our subjectivities and everyday practices. These regimes (state, family, economic enterprises etc) both enable and constrain cross-border practices and transnational relationships. Nonini and Ong (1997) suggest, in a “Foucaldo-Bourdieu-ian” vein, that transnationalist practice consists in strategies of capital accumulation that seek to resist the disciplinary operations or localisation (fixing them as local, available to be disciplined within the regime) to which various regimes of truth and power subject them. At the same time, these practices seek to appropriate “for their own uses the effects of the localisations these regimes have upon other disciplinable subjects” (Nonini and Ong 1997: 24). Conceptualising transnational practices in terms of a Bourdieu-ian logic of capital accumulation allows us to avoid giving these practices a voluntarist or totalising counter-hegemonic character. Rather, they are understood to conform to a logic of self-interest and competition within the market-like structures of (trans)national social fields. Note, however, that this does not reduce the motivations behind transnational practices to those of economic rationality. The definition of “capital” is not limited to material capital but, after Bourdieu, includes a
variety of forms of capital including cultural, symbolic and social capital. The plurality of types of capital allows us to consider economic rationalist strategies in relation to the accumulation of other types of capital that resist, contradict or mystify economic goals. An understanding of transnational practices according to a Bourdieu-ian logic of capital accumulation will later allow us to make sense of the apparently contradictory strategy by which overseas Vietnamese returnees accumulate “anticommunist” cultural capital, which confers status and belonging within the diaspora, even while they accumulate material and other forms of capital in Vietnam.

**Doi Moi and the Deterritorialisation of Exile**

In the Vietnam War/The American War, the RVN in the south and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north faced each other as enemies across the 17th parallel. Each sought to realise its own vision of the modern Vietnamese nation and to annihilate the radically oppositional vision of its enemy. In the decade following the fall of Saigon, the wartime aggression between the nations was carried over into an antagonistic relationship between a refugee or exile diaspora and a hostile regime at home. Their mutual oppositionality underpinned the national imaginaries of both camps as each attempted to rid itself of all traces of and contact with the other. In Vietnam the process of reunification had entailed a thoroughgoing cultural revolution in which the old subjects of the RVN must be reconstructed as socialist citizens, and in which all traces of the decadent hybrid culture of the war years must be erased. The modality of dealing with the national otherness represented by the RVN and its patron the US had shifted from warfare to cultural and ideological cleansing. Those in the diaspora were considered to
have irrevocably left the national community, and were officially referred to as
“American puppets” and “reactionaries”. Meanwhile in the diaspora, Vietnamese ethnic
and national identity was (re)constructed, with reference to the lost nation, as being
irreducibly anticommunist. Elites held that while a communist regime ruled in Vietnam,
the overseas Vietnamese could be nothing but exiles whose task was to maintain and
restore the only “authentic” vision of the Vietnamese nation. Exile was guaranteed by the
ongoing politics of the Cold War. The US enforced an embargo on trade with Vietnam
and discouraged its citizens from travelling there. These measures were observed by most
of the other host nations, effectively cutting the diaspora off for at least a decade after the
end of the war. Traffic between the diaspora and homeland during this “closed door”
period tended to be a one-way ticket, with refugees and emigrants leaving and
remittances, gifts and anticommunist broadcasts going back.

The advent of the New World Disorder, alongside reforms in Vietnam, has done
much to displace this geopolitics of exile. The institution of the Doi Moi reforms in
Vietnam in 1986 initiated a process of integration into the global capitalist economy that
has seen Vietnam multilateralise its foreign diplomatic and trade relations, resituate itself
culturally and economically in the Asia-Pacific, and sign a Bilateral Trade Agreement
with the US (which at the time of writing remains unratified by either nation’s
legislature). Integrating into world markets has meant that for its part, the Vietnamese
state has been obliged to relinquish ever greater degrees of control over flows of people,
capital, goods and information into Vietnam. As part of this liberalisation, the state is less
and less able to control practices of diasporic return. This means that amongst other
currents of global capitalist culture, the Vietnamese state faces the challenge of a
cosmopolitanisation by the diaspora and its dissonant experiences and visions of modernity and Vietnamese identity. Vietnam is now receiving around 300 000 returnees (15% of the diaspora) and up to $US 3 billion⁴ in remittances and informal investments from overseas Vietnamese per year. Overseas Vietnamese have officially invested over $US 200 million in Vietnam, and around 11 000 overseas Vietnamese are now estimated to live in Ho Chi Minh City, where some 250 000 households have relatives living in the diaspora (out of an estimated 500 000 households Vietnam-wide having overseas relatives). These flows and relationships have had a significant cultural impact. For instance, overseas Vietnamese commercial music culture is highly visible on the “grey market” for cultural goods in Vietnam, and diasporic performative styles and genres have played a large part in the rejuvenation of the domestic music scene. The influence of cosmopolitan overseas Vietnamese lifestyles and consumer habits is evident in Vietnam’s major urban centres, particularly in the form of bars, restaurants, night clubs and shops in Ho Chi Minh City’s fashionable District 1 and Hanoi’s Quan Cu (Haughton 1999, Vo Xuan Tuong 1998: 6, “Ho Chi Minh City Sees Investment Rush...”, “More Than 400 Overseas Vietnamese Enterprises...”).

Reform in Vietnam and the end of the Cold War precipitated a shift in policy on the part of nations formerly opposed to Ho Chi Minh. In the mid 1990s, the US dropped its policy of embargo and diplomatic isolation in favour of a strategy of “peaceful evolution” towards multi-party democracy and free markets through engagement. Most of the other nations hosting Vietnamese refugee populations had preceded it in this shift.

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⁴ Official remittances are around $US 1.2 billion per annum. The figure of 3 billion is a “guesstimate” of total remittances, including undeclared money and “contraband” investment (see Chapter Seven).
These changes were to have significant ramifications for diasporic community politics. Overseas Vietnamese elites had initially sought to impose an ethics of exile similar to the defeated Guomindang’s “three no’s” (no contact, no negotiation, no compromise with the communist regime) onto overseas Vietnamese. Already delegitimised as national leaders by the loss of the RVN, these community leaders underwent a further loss of status when overseas Vietnamese began to contravene their moral authority by returning to Vietnam en masse for family visits, tourism and investment. Exile had been transformed from a strict politics of return into something more like a mythology of diasporic identity. Diasporic elites, already experienced in the difficulty of maintaining a sense of distinct cultural identity in the face of the pressures of assimilation in the host nation, now faced the new challenge of protecting a specifically diasporic Vietnamese identity against replacement by the hegemonic ideal of Vietnameseness naturalised in the Vietnamese state.

The Contested Terrain of the Vietnamese Transnation

While Tran Van Truong can by no means be regarded as a typical diasporic subject, the struggle over his identity nevertheless allows us to begin to map out a terrain that is pertinent to an understanding of contemporary overseas Vietnamese public identities in general. I read this space of identity formation as being constituted by the projection of competing national imaginaries that (as I suggest in the title) are undergoing deterritorialisation by the establishment of transnational connections between them.

In the course of the protests, Little Saigon emerges as a multilayered site in which we discover the overlapping of no fewer than three “national” fields. The physical space
in which the protests occur is of course US national territory. Here, American police are charged with keeping public order, and Truong signifies as a haunting sign of the divisive force of ethnic politics in multicultural America. Little Saigon, the “capital of the Vietnamese exiles”, is also, however, subnational space. The flying of the RVN flag over this ethnoscrape signifies, if there was any doubt, that here a diasporic national imaginary coexists and competes with the dominant national imaginary. Members of the crowd assembled in Little Saigon are hailed simultaneously as US subjects and as subjects of the diaspora-as-imaginary-nation, sometimes referred to as Free Vietnam. Finally, these events can also be said to take place in the deterritorialised “national” space of the SRV, where Hanoi seeks to defend the rights of a putative pro-homeland majority, the constituents of an imaginary Vietnamese transnation. Truong’s contested public identity is thus formed at the intersection of three key discourses emanating from these overlapping physical and symbolic sites: diasporic discourses of exile, homeland discourses of deterritorialised nation, and host nation discourses of multiculturalism. One of my main concerns in this thesis will be with the way in which contemporary overseas Vietnamese identities are imagined, contested and enacted within and across these sites in the historical context of a shifting paradigm in relations between Vietnam and the diaspora.

As I have already pointed out, the post Cold War politics of diaspora-homeland relations has shifted from a paradigm of exile and relative non-contact to one of engagement. Note that in characterising the shift in relations between Vietnam and the diaspora since the mid to late eighties in this way, I wish to avoid the misleading impression that the advent of Doi Moi effected a clean-cut “epistemological break” in
relations between diaspora and homeland. This is not the case. Forms of transnational bifocality existed during the "closed door" period, and indeed during the war. There is evidence that during the period of partition (1954-1975), families split between north and south Vietnam were able to stay in touch by mail sent through overseas Vietnamese intermediaries in Paris, who acted as a "bridge" between the warring nations (Diep Dinh Hoa 2000). Conversely, forms of exile consciousness and anti-diaspora nationalism are still very powerful affective forces in the formation of contemporary Vietnamese identities. However, I will argue that it is only in the post Doi Moi era that such "grounded" identities are challenged by the advent of significant degrees of mobility, communication and exchange between Vietnam and the host nations.

This challenge is such that any picture of the post Cold War politics of diasporic identity needs to incorporate contemporary Vietnam as a site of identification, albeit a somewhat fractured one. Rather than accepting that homeland and diasporic Vietnamese identities are entirely distinct, I will suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of a highly contested transnational space of Vietnamese identity formation. As we have seen, rather than superseding Cold War narratives of Vietnamese identity, the idea of a Vietnamese transnation displaces and then reinscribes them with a vengeance. The Truong protests are symptomatic of this process, and of the emergence of a new struggle between contestatory national projects. This time the struggle is not for the national territory, but rather for the loyalties of overseas Vietnamese subjects - consumers, professionals, investors, tourists - who are increasingly constituted across the boundaries of homeland, diaspora and host nation. Where elites and the state once attempted to prevent cross-border processes, in the post Doi Moi period each seeks to capture an
emergent transnational Vietnam to its own politico-cultural agenda. According to this interpretation, what we witness in the above protests is not a simple scenario of a (re)localised, (re)territorialised diaspora rejecting outright the establishment of transnational flows between itself and communist Vietnam. Rather, it is a complex instance of a diasporic culture that has already been deterritorialised by homeland affiliations attempting to assert its hegemony over the emergent transnational social space that these affiliations constitute.

National Imaginaries and Transnational Governmentality

For Lacan (1977, 1981), the imaginary is located in the pre-symbolic (pre-linguistic), an order dominated by the image and the specular identifications of the subject. Castoriadis offers a more sociological definition of the imaginary, in a psychoanalytic Marxist vein, as the source and sanction of social institutions, which he locates in the symbolic. For him, any given socio-historically constituted imaginary consists of a number of arbitrarily posited, unmotivated figures, schemata, and images that are the precondition for, give consistency to, and determine and specify meanings in, the symbolic. While its contents are in some sense “unreal” products of the imagination, the imaginary’s effects are, however, entirely real (Castoriadis 1987: 148). Benedict Anderson (1991) has made perhaps the most influential connection between nation and imagination by showing that all national communities are, from a certain perspective, imagined rather than authentic and primordial entities. National identities are not simply given in perpetuity, but must be reproduced over and again through the labour of the imagination. More recently, Arjun Appadurai has stressed the centrality of the work of
the imagination to the formation of modern subjectivities, arguing that imagination and fantasy are now social practices which enter into the fabrication of social lives in a multitude of ways (Appadurai 1996: 54). The mobilisation of protesters against Tran Van Truong amply demonstrates the way in which an exile national imaginary can be translated into social identities and political action. This translation is, however, always contextual and contingent. Those same commentators who enthused about the protests later bemoaned the way in which the community’s newfound unity in the anticommunist cause degenerated into squabbling over how the funds raised should be used and accusations of embezzlement.

Clearly, there is an intrinsic relationship between, on the one hand, national and transnational imaginaries, and on the other, the systems of governmentality that seek to shape and discipline the practices of (trans)national subjects. It is only the convincingness of the former which makes the state’s wielding of power in the name of the nation appear to be legitimate, necessary and just. In this work I will be concerned with both the (trans)national imaginings of the state and diasporic elites, as well as with the more concrete manifestations of these imaginings in the exercise of state and communal power. My privileging of the term “imaginary” in the title is, however, in part an attempt to right an asymmetry. When one speaks of the diaspora as an entity that has its own national imaginary, one brackets off the fact that the diaspora-as-nation is in fact broken up and distributed among a plurality of host nations. Only in the modality of nationalist fantasy can the striated territory of diaspora be thought of as the purely national space of an entity such as Free Vietnam. Further, the relationship between the subjects of a nation and its nation-building discourses is of course very different to that of a diasporic population and
the nationalist imaginings of “community leaders”. The latter have no capacity to legislate national identity through the institutions of state, and thus the transmission of an extranational identity to the next generation is not guaranteed. The overseas Vietnamese leaders were in a very different position to the Guomindang, for instance, who were able to decree such things as that travel from Taiwan to the mainland was a breach of national security regulations. While Vietnamese state discourses about such things as diasporic cultural pollution may translate into policy and action, exile discourses about the consumption of “communist” cultural products in the diaspora must remain fantasies of executive power. As Palumbo-Liu points out, the diasporic subject perpetually attempts to reinstate the state in the form of the cultural or imaginary nation. This entity has no political status, but comes to replace and stand in for the state: “in the collective imagination, the compensation becomes the thing itself” (Palumbo-Liu 1999: 345). Put another way, the fantasy of the Exile Nation (or Exile-as-Nation) becomes a way of dealing with the trauma arising from the loss of social power which the former constituents of the RVN, especially elites, experienced when they were reconstituted as ethnic minority subjects in the host nations. More concretely, its reproduction legitimates the status of the ex-RVN elites as the “natural” leaders of diasporic communities, and so continues to confer real social power upon them.

In my analysis, I have tried to identify an exile imaginary as distinct from exile as an actual politics of return or as an ideology (“anticommunism”). In its latter guises, exile may be identified with an “aristocracy” of first generation elites that, while still influential, is downwardly mobile in the context of overseas Vietnamese community politics. It is being replaced by a “1.5 generation” elite that prioritises issues of local
community over homeland politics. (An example of this is the recent replacement of an ex air force general in his sixties by a young professional in his thirties as head of the New South Wales chapter of the Vietnamese Community in Australia.) While this new generation of community leaders retains an antimunist identity, at least as a matter of symbolic ethnicity, it is most focused on struggles for social and economic equality in the host nations. Despite these generational and political shifts, however, I would stress that exile remains the dominant symbolic resource for thinking diasporic identity, and for conceptualising the diaspora’s relationship with the contemporary homeland. While the Truong protesters may not share a unitary politics of return, they definitely do share an imaginary of exile. I predict that this will remain a defining feature of diasporic identity, despite shifts that may occur in community and homeland politics.

While the capacities of diasporic elites and the Vietnamese state to govern may be unequal, there is parity in their capacities to imagine. Performing much of the analysis at the level of the imaginary allows us to do that which would otherwise not be possible: make a comparison between the ways in which homeland and diasporic leaders have responded to the challenges posed by the advent of transnational flows between diaspora and homeland. Focusing on the operations of the imaginary enables us to engage in the somewhat novel analysis of the way in which even an imaginary nation is capable of articulating a response to transnationality. Diasporic elites, just like those in the homeland, are attempting to shape and discipline transnational practices as a means of accumulating capital and power, albeit of different kinds. For the leaders of the Vietnamese regime, this capital includes the economic and educational capital which overseas Vietnamese and foreigners are invited to bring to Vietnam. By contrast
diasporic elites, by capturing diaspora-homeland transnational flows into an "anticommunist" imaginary, are attempting to accumulate the symbolic capital which would allow them to reproduce their domination of overseas Vietnamese community politics. Ensuring that transnational links to Vietnam remain critical or "disloyal" ones becomes a means of perpetuating the exilic national fantasy in which their authority - and indeed their very subjectivity - is anchored. An additional benefit of the use of the term imaginary is that it points to the non-total nature of state power in Vietnam. It emphasises the fact that state power is, in a sense, always a fantasy of a perfect control that can never be realised. The state's ability to discipline overseas Vietnamese subjects and capital within the Vietnamese national field is anything but perfect (for instance, probably more than half of the overseas Vietnamese capital which flows into Vietnam does so unofficially). Its power to shape the identities and determine the loyalties of diasporic subjects at a distance is even more attenuated. Thus if the diasporic elite's capacity to govern is radically compromised, that of the Vietnamese state is by no means total.

My use of the phrase "detrimentalising national imaginaries" in the subtitle has, then, a triple significance. Firstly, it suggests a process that is happening "to" national imaginaries in the context of globalisation, i.e. a partial erosion of "sovereignty". Secondly, it points to a theoretical challenge to existing, spatially bound understandings of nationalist imaginings in Vietnam and the diaspora. Thirdly, it signifies an initiative on the part of state and diasporic elites to respond to the challenges of transnational social movements, and by so doing to reproduce their own power and legitimacy.
Contextualising Diasporic Identity in the Host Nation

When one is physically “in” a local diasporic community, one is also in a host nation. As well as being interpellated as diasporic subjects, overseas Vietnamese are also subjects of the nation-building discourses of the countries in which they have settled, and have been subject to their racial and spatial orders in the process of community formation. Most importantly, Vietnamese communities and identities have been structured in and through the categories of multiculturalism, which I will understand as a state ideology for the incorporation and management of ethnic difference (see for instance Hage 1995, Perera and Pugliese 1995). Multiculturalist discourse is a key site for the production and management of ethnic identities within the settler and multicultural nations in which the majority of overseas Vietnamese were resettled (the US, Canada, Australia, France, Britain, Germany and the other Western European nations). The host nations have given antimunists in the diaspora some limited support in pursuing their political goals in the homeland, but at the same time have pursued their own foreign policy objectives towards Vietnam, often clashing with diasporic sensibilities and undermining exile politics in the process. While normalisation has significantly reduced the ability of antimunist elites to hegemonise the politics of return, exile discourse has constituted something of an alternative public sphere within which challenges to the minority/majority relationship constructed within host nations have been mounted. Some parts of this work (Chapters Five and Six) contextualise overseas Vietnamese subjects more concretely within local, host nation contexts, while others (Chapters Two, Four and Eight) are more interested in the transformations of the exile imaginary in that (fantasy) mode in which it conceptualises itself as having “foreign relations” with the SRV.
Particularising Diaspora

An important qualification to my use of the term “Vietnamese diaspora” is that I am dealing only with the “anticommunist” diaspora, i.e. the post-1975 diaspora, numbering some two million, in the developed countries. This excludes overseas Vietnamese in the SRV’s neighbouring countries, numbering around 300 000 in China, 120 000 in Thailand, and 100 000 in Cambodia; as well as some 200 000 overseas Vietnamese living in former Eastern Bloc states. The histories of migration of these overseas Vietnamese communities are significantly different to those who left Vietnam for the “other side” in the Cold War, and my analysis does not seek to say anything about them. (See Chapter Two for a discussion of post-1975 waves of migration from Vietnam).

Within a focus on the diaspora in the West, I will concentrate in particular on Australia and the US. The US is host to the world’s largest overseas Vietnamese population, numbering around one million. Australia has the fourth largest number of overseas Vietnamese (150 000), coming after the US, France (400 000), and China. Of the Western host nations, Australia has the highest number of Vietnam-born residents per head of population, Vietnamese Australians comprising just under 1% of the total population. The Vietnamese American community, because of its size and situatedness in Ho Chi Minh’s sometime arch enemy - the world’s most economically, culturally, politically and militarily powerful nation - is the most important site for the imagining of diasporic identity. Orange County’s Little Saigon is the universally acknowledged “capital” of the Vietnamese exiles, not least because it is the global centre of an overseas
Vietnamese commercial cultural production which has audiences throughout the diaspora (see Cunningham and Nguyen 2000). Vietnamese Australians and Americans share roughly the same vision of diasporic identity, and participates in the same public sphere, for instance over the Internet, in international meetings of diasporic political organisations, and in the consumption of popular cultural products such as music videos produced in California. Thus while there exist significant intra-diasporic differences, events in the US tend to have the power to project themselves globally, such that the Tran Van Truong protests, for instance, are something about which one might have a discussion with overseas Vietnamese from all over the world. Ditto the “Mother” incident analysed in Chapter Four. A further similarity between the communities is that they are both situated in multicultural settler nations (although there are significant differences between the two multiculturalisms (see Ang and Stratton 1994)), both of which opposed Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnam War/The American War. While homeland politics are perhaps more conservative in the US, the Vietnamese Australian community has been ranked by SRV scholar Tran Trong Dang Dan alongside the American and Canadian communities as “extremely anticommunist”, as opposed to more moderate Western European communities. Of over 2 000 publications having anticommunist content surveyed by Dan, 60% originated in the US, Canada and Australia, while only 35% originated in over ten Western European nations (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 147).

Methodology

Adopting a research strategy of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), I have situated my research neither entirely in Vietnam nor in the diaspora, but rather in both
homeland and diasporic sites. Marcus sees multi-sited ethnographic research strategies as a means of crosscutting traditional ethnographic distinctions such as local/global and lifeworld/system. Ideally, in such research the world system is not an “external” macrotheoretical construct that locates and gives context to the sites in which ethnography is carried out. Rather, the system is understood to be integral to and embedded in the multiple contexts of ethnographic research, such that one maps fragmented parts of the world system in the process of doing “sited” ethnography in a plurality of interconnected places. Multi-sited ethnography is both “in” and “of” the world system, as Marcus suggests in his title. Doing research in both Vietnam and the diaspora thus becomes a way of mapping the “macro” structure of the emergent transnational connections between them, as well as “captur[ing] the impact of [macro-structural] deterritorialisation on the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences” in Vietnamese and overseas Vietnamese sites (Appadurai 1996: 52). Ethnographically grounding somewhat abstract global processes within and between specific national territories also becomes a means of rethinking the role of the nation-state in an era of globalisation (Kearney 1995: 548). As Ong points out, embedding ethnography in the analysis of global processes is a means of exploring how culture is transformed by capitalism and the modern nation-state, and how regional and national assimilations of capitalism in turn give it new cultural meanings which “valorise flexibility, difference and transnationality” (Ong 1999: 240).

My diasporic field work was carried out between 1996 and 1998 in a variety of community contexts in Sydney, including: community associations, ceremonies, households, a martial arts school, media institutions and “on the street” in Cabramatta,
Sydney’s “Little Saigon”, where I lived for six months in 1996. It was in this period of residence in Cabramatta, during which I experienced the everyday realities of life in perhaps the most over-represented and mis-represented urban space in Australia, that I conceived the critique put forward in Chapter Five. The dissonance between the knowledges of “Cabra” produced by living there and those produced by media representations of it led eventually to this analysis of the image of Cabramatta in the multicultural imaginary. During this time I did a six month stint as a “novice” in the Vovinam martial arts school, which left me bruised and battered (see Chapter Six), and in 1998 I did another six month stint as a volunteer English teacher at the Vietnamese Women’s Association, which left me hoarse but with an insight into the relationship between the public discourse and institutional practices of Vietnamese community associations and the private worlds of those who participate in them. It also gave me a chance to experience the interaction between recent migrants and long-term refugee residents, who co-existed and sometimes clashed in the class (see Chapter Two).

I have drawn heavily on printed and electronic texts as well as ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in order to be able to flesh out both the local and global dimensions of contemporary Vietnamese identities, and to build rich descriptions of diasporic and homeland (trans)national imaginaries. The Internet was an invaluable source of information and a means of immersing myself in the global diasporic public sphere. Information that I downloaded from the net about events in the US - such as the Tran Van Truong protests and the controversy over the Thuy Nga company’s Paris by Night 40 video (see Chapter Four) - was contextualised for me by discussions with overseas Vietnamese in a variety of places. As I have said, I debated the incident with
Viet Kieu in Saigon. On my return to Sydney, I found that this same international event had insinuated itself into the local texture of Vietnamese Australian community life.

Sitting in Pho 54 in Cabramatta and reading an article on the aftershocks of the Truong protests in the local paper Viet Luan, I found myself engaged in conversation by half the patrons in the tiny restaurant. After getting a kick out of my linguistic abilities, they were keen to set me straight on Tran Van Truong and Thuy Nga.

Regrettably, my finances did not permit a field trip to California. Thus my analysis of the cultural politics of the Vietnamese American diaspora is not backed up by the authority of ethnography, and so must remain one of plausibility rather than proof. Having said this, I would argue that the Internet and Vietnamese language media are important ethnographic sites in themselves. In these sites, one has access to the articulation of diasporic nationalist imaginings that it is difficult or impossible to gain access to by other means. I found that in face to face interaction with a perceived representative of the host culture such as a white anthropologist like myself, Vietnamese Australians typically did not articulate the nationalist aspirations of which overseas Vietnamese websites and newspapers are full, or did so only cursorily. This may be explained in part by a feeling that it is necessary to hide one’s “national will” from the host nation. The Vietnamese conception of relations with the Australian state has historically been couched in a discourse of gratitude, and community leaders have often internalised host society criticism by enjoining Vietnamese Australians to behave like “good guests”. The English title of the Vietnamese Community in Australia, for instance, omits the “Free” which features in the Vietnamese title (the Free Vietnamese Community in Australia [Cong Dong Ngvoi Viet Nam Tu Do tai Uc Chau]). This omission shields
from non-Vietnamese speakers the political will that the organisation embodies for its constituents. When I interviewed the then head of this organisation in 1998, he assured me that its policy towards Hanoi was “moderate”. Some time later, I saw him on the VNTV program on Sydney’s community TV channel, C31. He was being interviewed at the protest marking the fall of Saigon that takes place yearly outside the Vietnamese Embassy in Canberra. In this context, he announced that next year, the protests would not be taking place, since the protesters would be celebrating the restoration of the former capital Saigon in a free and democratic Vietnam (VNTV broadcast, 30.4. 1999)!

Certainly, there was a glint in his eye when he made this pronouncement. However, the point I wish to make is that in order to access such nationalist imaginings, one is obliged to perform a *media* ethnography as well as the more traditional kind. My criticism of studies of overseas Vietnamese communities which rely solely on interviews, particularly those carried out by researchers who do not speak Vietnamese (e.g. Viviani 1996, Reyes 1999), is that they fail to explore the way in which a Vietnamese language public sphere rich in narratives of nation and exile articulates to and forms part of the reality of the everyday lives of their subjects. I would argue that such imaginings have constituted a key symbolic resource for the formation of overseas Vietnamese identities, and have enabled a surprisingly strong project of cultural and linguistic maintenance and the spatial consolidation of communities in circumstances that have frequently been adverse. To an extent, I have allowed the themes and concerns of this Vietnamese language public sphere to guide the direction of my research rather than bringing to it the host nation-centric agendas which other scholars have typically brought to the study of Vietnamese Australians and Americans.
My fieldwork in Vietnam was carried out in Ho Chi Minh City, with the aid of a generous grant from Sydney University’s Carlyle Greenwell Bequest. I was able to make three field trips to Vietnam. The first visit was in 1996, during which I undertook a six-month language course (to supplement studies already begun in Vietnam in 1992 and continued in Australia), graduating with a certificate in Advanced Vietnamese from the Ho Chi Minh General University [Đại Học Tổng Họp Ho Chi Minh]. The second trip was in 1998, lasting two months, during which I did research on the consumption of diasporic commercial music culture in Vietnam (see Chapter Three). This field trip involved interviews with consumers, participant observation in viewing diasporic music videos, interviews with video shop proprietors, archival research in the Ho Chi Minh City International Library on back issues of Tuoi Tre and Saigon Giai Phong, and largely unsuccessful attempts to cut through red tape and interview officials at the Ministry of Culture and Information. On the third trip, in 1999, also lasting two months, I carried out research on Vietnamese discourses of deterritorialised nation. This involved interviews with officials from the Ho Chi Minh City office of the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, interviews with overseas Vietnamese professionals living and working in Vietnam, and gathering media, legal and social science texts on the overseas Vietnamese.

I chose to do my Vietnam research in Ho Chi Minh City because, as Vietnam’s business capital and as the former capital of the RVN, it has the closest interconnections with the diaspora and diasporic culture. There, one finds the greatest number of overseas Vietnamese returnees, and witnesses the greatest impact of the return of diasporic culture to the homeland.
The chapters alternate between Vietnam and the diaspora. Chapter Two explores the way in which the temporary return visits to Vietnam enabled by Doi Moi developed into a social movement which challenged the power of diasporic elites to impose a strict politics of return and a highly (re)territorialised notion of diasporic identity as a victim, refugee or exile one. In Chapters Three and Four, we shall look at reactions in the diaspora and in Vietnam to the emergence of a Vietnamese language transnational commercial music culture. These chapters chart local reactions to the deterritorialisation of homeland and diasporic “national” cultures by unregulated flows of commercial cultural products. We see how the Vietnamese state and diasporic anticommunist elites have sought to redraw cultural-national boundaries in the face of a mutual cultural pollution by “reactionary” | “communist” texts-in-motion. Chapters Five and Six contextualise the transnational politics of Vietnamese identity against the positionality of overseas Vietnamese as ethnic subjects, produced through the nation-building discourse of multiculturalism. Chapter Five explores the way in which Vietnamese Australian translocalities such as Cabramatta are figured in conflicting ways in multicultural and diasporic imaginaries. Chapter Six follows the theme of the defence and reproduction of exile culture by looking at the transmission of diasporic subjectivity in the context of an overseas Vietnamese martial arts school in Sydney. We shall look at the way in which the “Vovinam habitus” potentially resists and recodes dominant representations of Vietnamese bodies circulating in the host society’s public sphere, as well as the way in which it may be used to think the diaspora-homeland relationship.

If Chapters Two, Three and Four look at coercive means of controlling transnational flows and subjectivities, Chapters Seven and Eight focus on productive
means of so doing. These chapters look at the way in which the Vietnamese state and elites in the diaspora have met the challenges of transnationality by re-imagining themselves in deterritorialised idioms. This entails developing more flexible notions of “sovereignty” (Ong 1999) and national and diasporic belonging as a means of maintaining and accumulating power and, in the case of the SRV, foreign capital and expertise. In Chapter Seven we shall look at the SRV’s project of transnational nation-building in the context of contemporary Vietnamese discourses of nation, modernity and globalisation. Chapter Eight shows how the notion of exile has begun, paradoxically, to function itself as a transnational imaginary. Just as the SRV extends an imaginary Vietnamese transnation into diasporic space, so do the exiles project a “transnational exilic space” onto Vietnamese soil.

Taken together, the chapters should begin to constitute a map of the fragmented and contestatory transnational field in which contemporary overseas Vietnamese identities are formed.