

CHAPTER  
**7**

# Survival and Deferred Place-Making at Sea

## Onboard Socialities of Vietnamese and Rohingya Boatpeople

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Studies of place and place-making have gained considerable ground in the last few decades in the social sciences to improve our understanding of social, cultural, and temporal assemblages. In particular, place-making strategies have been considered crucial for refugees and migrants to connect to new environments and social worlds. This chapter takes up this volume's challenge to make central the "along-the-way" places refugees and migrants traverse on their journeys toward safety, new homes, and new lives. There has been increased scholarly attention for place-making in transit scenarios or on the move (Chan and Loveridge 1987; Nguyen 2017; Vo 2006; Vogt 2018). Yet, the majority of studies continue to focus on migration scenarios on land. In light of the growing significance of maritime movements, escapes (Mezzadra 2004), and long-distance travel for refugees, this chapter sheds light on the potentials for place-making, or the way people make sense of and actively shape particular spaces aboard refugee vessels. In particular, we scrutinize emerging socialities of passengers (so-called boat people) who have been confined to vessels for prolonged periods of time and ask whether these can turn into more profound sociabilities (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018: 128), thereby contributing to this volume's call to show "how new social relationships emerge in moments of tentative, often

fragile, and possibly skeptical or even violent situations of place-based encounter[s]” (Drotbohm and Winters, this volume).

In this chapter, we discuss two significant mass movements at sea in Southeast Asia: Vietnamese (1975–1996) and Rohingya boat people (2012–present). While the plight of Vietnamese boat people received a substantial amount of international awareness and solidarity in Southeast Asia and the Global North, Rohingya boat people have elicited little to no solidarity; rather, they face racist discrimination even in neighboring fellow Muslim countries (Hoffstaedter 2017). Based on fieldwork interviews with Rohingya we conducted in Malaysia and Indonesia, and on recorded interviews and interview scripts with Vietnamese conducted by other researchers, which are accessible in online repositories, we have collated narratives of surviving refugees who detail their social interactions, including gestures of solidarity and compassion as well as rivalry and fierce competition over scarce resources. The reasons behind relying on two different sets of data are twofold. First, we want to point out the historical continuance of maritime escapes and pushbacks in the region, which makes the recent experience of the maritime mass movements of Rohingya anything but unique. Second, engaging with historical accounts, such as autobiographies from Vietnamese, proved very insightful, as, in our experience, Rohingya were reluctant to speak about what happened on the boats, not least due to the immediacy of their often-traumatic experiences. Former Vietnamese boat people, on the other hand, had undergone a process of healing and coming to terms with their traumatic past. In light of their advanced age, they were often willing to offer more detailed accounts of those prolonged maritime passages.

Despite the ample empirical evidence from Rohingya and Vietnamese boat peoples’ testimonies of their deepened social relations and mutual dependency for survival among the passengers of their refugee boats, we argue that the overarching hostility entailed in being stranded at sea precludes place-making stratagems from fully enfolded their (terrestrial) potentials. In our view, place-making is severely hindered by the unreceptive and incalculable materialities of the sea, which contrasts the (terrestrial) breadth of possibilities for effective place-making, particularly for the purpose of refugee emancipation and refugee-led activism. In our analysis we concentrate on Southeast Asia, a region that has seen two significant large-scale maritime migrations over the last fifty years. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, about two million people left Vietnam, of whom approximately eight hundred thousand made their escapes on boats to neighboring countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Australia. This human exodus peaked in 1978 and 1979 but continued until the early 1990s (Robinson 1998, 2004). There are no definite numbers of deaths at

sea for Vietnamese boat people and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates between two hundred thousand and four hundred thousand Vietnamese died at sea.

The second large exodus is the forced displacement of the Rohingya ethnic minority from Myanmar. About one million Rohingya live in squalid refugee camps around Cox's Bazar near the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. Because Bangladesh is reluctant to host them permanently, many Rohingya have sought to migrate onward. Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia has become the most favored destination (Huennekes 2018). The UNHCR estimates that between 2012 and 2015 around 112,500 Rohingya headed to Malaysia across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea by boat. On those maritime journeys at least 1,800 Rohingya are assumed to have perished due to abuse and deprivation (UNHCR 2017). While Vietnamese refugees faced pushbacks from neighboring states in some instances, the intensity of pushbacks of Rohingya boats has increased drastically, which is in line with the global deterrence regime.

Vietnamese and Rohingya embarked on journeys that are usually longer than the crossings of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, with some journeys lasting up to seven months. For a variety of reasons detailed later in this chapter, the Vietnamese and Rohingya refugees experienced extended periods of being stuck at sea, which had an impact on the forced socialities on board. Based on historical accounts from Vietnamese refugees and more recent interviews with Rohingya refugees, this chapter sheds light on the survival strategies aboard those refugee vessels and thus on precarious place-making in locations often considered “out-of-the-way” (Drotbohm and Winters, this volume). It also documents the extreme hardship Vietnamese and Rohingya experienced along the way and while they were on these boats by seeking to understand how place-making strategies can be related to forced immobility and immobilization at sea. Given that we conceive refugee vessels as non-places (Hoffstaedter and Missbach 2022), we remain skeptical of possible place-making potentials to fully materialize at sea and argue instead that most passengers defer place-making to an imagined future. Their hope for surviving these long and exhausting journeys at sea and orienting themselves toward a desired-for future elsewhere is the key factor to withstand the agony afflicted onto them due to non-rescue.

## **Refugee Boats: A Fundamental Component of the Migration Infrastructure**

For many refugees, the only way to escape persecution and enter any state other than their own is by unsanctioned means, including unauthorized travel by boat. The materiality of the vehicles used for maritime crossings,

whether rubber dinghies, wooden fishing boats, and larger freight ships, can determine the outcome of the crossings in many ways (Walter 2015). Overcrowded, unseaworthy boats and their passengers have become the ultimate image of pitiable people in search of safe havens and safe countries. Not only are refugee boats vehicles for escape and moving targets for border enforcement authorities, but, for the following analysis, they also represent sociopolitical entities. More and more people fleeing by boat experience protracted passages at sea, for example, when boats break down or sail off course. Journeys across the open sea are often deemed dangerous because of the very unpredictable nature of oceans (Steinberg 2001) and the inadequate vessels used. Boat people are at risk of dying from dehydration, starvation, drowning (especially if they cannot swim), or abuse at the hands of their smugglers. Thus, one incident at sea can easily result in hundreds of fatalities. Some boats vanish at sea without ever being detected, turning the ocean in an open mass grave or “seametry” (Abderrezak 2020). Thus, the boat to freedom also holds the grim possibility of becoming a coffin—“one of many floating sarcophagus[es]” that never make it to shore (Maravillas 2013: 19).

Despite the spectacularizing of maritime deaths in recent times, the visibility of drowned or even drowning boat people does not only result in public sympathy. Quite the opposite, the fear of future refugee flotillas also fuels anti-migration sentiments. Politicians react to those fears by creating more or less effective deterrence strategies, but also by shifting state duties to nonstate stakeholders, such as is currently happening in the Mediterranean Sea (Cuttitta 2018).

Yet the state—as potential guarantor of refugee protection—remains crucial for maritime asylum seekers. To claim asylum, people must enter the land territory of another state (Squire 2009; FitzGerald 2019). Once there, that state must avoid *refoulement* (forcing the return of asylum seekers to where they face or fear persecution) under international human rights laws and should not penalize asylum seekers for their irregular mode of entry. To counteract these obligations, many receiving states have enacted laws and maintain maritime interdiction efforts to stop potential asylum seekers landing in their jurisdictions (Hathaway 1992). Thus, potential receiving countries engage in pushbacks, non-embarkation or non-rescue policies, thereby also increasing the duration of journeys and exponentiating different vulnerabilities onboard.

Different state and nonstate actors (for example, coast guards, defense forces, civilian rescuers) involved in international maritime migration are guided by a variety of laws, norms, and operational standards that create a complex legal environment. Yet actors who seek to deter and redirect maritime asylum seekers often gain the upper hand. This becomes increasingly noticeable in, for example, the ongoing impunity for pushbacks enjoyed by

states that violate international laws and norms of aiding persons in distress at sea (Moreno-Lax, Ghezlbash, and Klein 2019).

These “non-entrée politics” (Hathaway 1992) create a new quality of immobilization at sea, transforming boats from a means of escape into floating prisons. Even though some boats are supplied with food, water, and fuel before being turned away, the prohibition to allow people to come to shore results in “carceral seascapes” (Stierl 2021), an imposed condition of strandedness at sea for undetermined or extended periods of time (Hoffstaedter and Missbach 2022). Potential receiving states that deliberately choose to ignore the pleas of boat people in distress or purposefully increase the deadly risks for boat people when pushing them back to the open sea become executors of “necropolitics,” the “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2003: 39), as they decide who is allowed to live and who is left to die. Potential destination countries are increasingly exploiting the carceral quality of the sea to complement their already intensified containment efforts on land (Taylor 2019). The diverse regulatory factors and geopolitical dynamics responsible for making maritime voyages ever more risky and dangerous call for renewed and critical research engagement to better comprehend what those risks and rejections do to the people aboard boats redirected to the open sea (see also Ramsay in this volume, on the historically produced conditions and continuities of displacement).

In this chapter we capture the new qualities of immobilization in carceral seascapes by focusing our attention to South–South mobilities, in Southeast Asia—a region with only minimal formalized national refugee protection standards. Southeast Asia does, however, have a long tradition of maritime (im)migration, hospitality, and an “archipelagic cosmopolitanism” (Hoffstaedter 2011: 192–95). Apart from maritime escapes of Acehnese and Moros to Malaysia, two forced maritime mass movements stand out in the last fifty years: Vietnamese (1975–1996) and Rohingya boat people (2012–the present). These two maritime movements are noteworthy not only because they involve prolonged maritime transit but also because of the large number of refugees traversing the region by sea. These movements have complicated attempts of potential recipient states to control their borders and prevent new arrivals while also fulfilling their obligations under international law.

Although many years separate the migrations of the Vietnamese and the Rohingya, there are striking similarities in the regional responses to these people on the move, not least because legal norms in refugee reception in Southeast Asia remain underdeveloped. There are also, however, noticeable differences in international reactions, first and foremost the global resettlement fatigue that set in after the mass resettlements of Vietnamese

boat people to countries in the Global North. In the mass exodus by sea from Vietnam in the late 1970s and 1980s, approximately eight hundred thousand people fled by boat to Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Australia (Phillips and Spinks 2013). These maritime journeys varied in scale and infrastructure, as some relied on small fishing vessels not made for ocean journeys, while others boarded trawlers and larger vessels in more organized international smuggling operations. While many Vietnamese boat people reported being passed by ships that did not respond to their distress calls, their escapes engendered high levels of international awareness and solidarity. Between 1979 and 1982, some 623,800 people, many of them rescued at sea, were resettled in 20 countries beyond Southeast Asia based on commitments made by the international community (Robinson 1998). Despite international attempts to establish an orderly departure program in Vietnam, “unorderly” escapes remained the norm until the early 1990s.

More recently, from 2012 onward, Southeast Asia has experienced the forcible displacement of large numbers of Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar. In 2017 alone, around 700,000 Rohingya were expelled by the scorched-earth campaigns of the Myanmar military (Fair 2018). Most Rohingya fled to the makeshift refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh, where they are only tolerated temporarily and face potential renewed displacement or forced return to Myanmar. Between 2012 and 2020, more than 120,000 Rohingya embarked on secondary maritime movements to Malaysia with the help of a well-developed transnational smuggling and trafficking infrastructure (Hoffstaedter and Missbach 2021). Many leave the shore on small (often fishing) boats to avoid detection and are then transferred to larger vessels that can hold up to 800 passengers. Increased border protection and deterrence policies by Southeast Asian states have on several occasions caused standoffs at sea—the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis being the most internationally recognized lethal deadlock. This crisis was constituted by denial of access to the territory of potential destination countries (Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia) and by diversion to other, undetermined destinations. These deterrence measures were designed to make the prospects so unfavorable that other refugees would abandon their plans to travel by boat. Nevertheless, the number of Rohingya boats heading to Southeast Asia increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but so did the number of pushbacks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in Malaysia and Indonesia justified their usage of pushbacks as responses to the pandemic. Related public health measures were exploited for the further marginalization of Rohingya who had arrived long before the pandemic (Jalil and Hoffstaedter 2023). In light of this hostile environment and open rejections that contributed to the prolonga-

tion of maritime refugee journeys, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the socialities that emerged on board in order to depict place-making strategies in non-places.

## **Vietnamese and Rohingya Survivors' Testimonies**

In order to set the scene and depart from the macropolitical context, we begin our empirical section with three narratives, two from a Vietnamese and one from a Rohingya refugee about their experience of prolonged boat journeys. Vietnamese testimonies were collected from a range of publicly available oral history projects that document Vietnamese escapes (Pham and Siry 2019; Thong and Tanaka 2022; Tran and Vu 2016; Tung 2020). Rohingya testimonies were collected as part of ethnographic research projects to document refugee lives in peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia. Fieldwork in Malaysia was conducted by Hoffstaedter between 2015 and 2016 predominantly in the Klang Valley, including Klang, Petaling Jaya, and Kuala Lumpur (Hoffstaedter 2017). Fieldwork involving Rohingya in Indonesia concentrated mainly on Aceh and was conducted by Missbach in 2016, following the first Andaman Sea crisis (Missbach 2017; McNevin and Missbach 2018). While both sets of fieldwork have informed our contextual knowledge on Rohingya refugees, in this chapter we have selected only testimonies from Hoffstaedter's fieldwork.

When we began to look at some of the Vietnamese stories, in the form of audio- and video-recorded life interviews and transcripts, (auto)biographies, and even graphic novels produced by second-generation Vietnamese migrants, we were struck by the structural similarities between them and our Rohingya material. The conditions on the boats and the dangers they faced at sea had slight variations but shared a common theme of deferred place-making in a liminal stage of transit from their homeland to a new life elsewhere. Many testimonies of Vietnamese and Rohingya also featured tales of survival from the forces of nature, including bad weather and rough seas, often early in interviews with them.

You know, hundred mile an hour, lots of rain and wind. And my brother say the waves was so high that you don't see the breaking point. All you saw is a wall of black water, coming toward you, in front of you. And this little boat, like a toy, this little boat just climb up this mountaintop, like 30-story building, to plunge down. And then, again, the next wall of black water. (Tran and Vu 2016)

Both Rohingya and Vietnamese boat people had to face storms, diseases, and starvation aboard their vessels, which often were deemed unsafe for

journeys across open waters, but each group also encountered a number of more specific dangers. These specific dangers derived from the actions of other people rather than from forces of nature. One of the greatest dangers for the Vietnamese during their journeys was pirates, who preyed on boat people specifically, assuming they would be carrying valuables. As the following testimony illustrates, encounters with pirates had very detrimental consequences for those on board.

First I came to Thailand by boat. My boat so small, but they were 55 people in the boat. We went for 9 days and 8 nights. After 5 days, we didn't have anything to eat or drink, and some people fainted. We opened their mouths and gave them urine and after that they woke up. Two people died, and after two more days we met a boat. I saw seven men on the boat. They waved their hands and my boat came beside it and they picked us up then put us in their boat. They cooked a lot of food for us. After we had already eaten everybody feel full and happy. We thought we had freedom, but bad luck came to us. They spoke Thai Language. We didn't understand what they were saying. They took our hammers, saws and knives. They took every body's gold jewelry and everything precious to us. My boat had three women and one girl. They kidnapped the girl. I was very lucky because I cut my hair like a man. I wore my husband's clothes and on my face I put a lot of oil. I looked so ugly. After that they threw us back on our boat. I remember a man took my daughter and threw her in the sea. I said please help her. My brother in-law immediately jumped down into the sea and caught her and my husband gave him a stick. He held it and he got on the boat. Our boat didn't run on gasoline, but we used sails to continue for more days and more nights. We met another Thai boat. We were very scared, but this boat had eight men on it, and they were humane. They gave us a lot of food. They had a long rope, they attached it to my boat and brought us to Thailand. (Thong and Tanaka 2022)

The Rohingya we were able to interview did not mention piracy at sea. One of the biggest risks for them derives from the very networks that enabled their movement in the first place. Often the traffickers and smugglers started to extort additional payments from the people onboard or from their relatives while at sea.

In 2013 . . . one of my friends told me “You wanna go to Malaysia, you have to go to the seashore and wait there at midnight. Then the trafficker will get you with the boat. They'll take you to Malaysia.” After that, at 3 o'clock, the trafficker got into a boat. I get into the boat with my friend. But it was so difficult to live in the boat because they keep us like rubbish on the boat. It smelt so bad on the boat, we [were confined below deck and] cannot see anything, it's like darkness. So, all the



people are crying. Even when all people were on the boat, the trafficker tortured us. They gave me food two times a day, in the morning they give us Maggi [instant noodles], at night, a handful of rice. If anyone said they want to go to the toilet, the trafficker won't let them to go. They only beat them. I was in the boat about 15 days.

When we get to Thailand, I stepped off the boat in the water and cut my foot. There are broken bottles in the water. I can show you the scar under my foot. I used to cry a lot because it was so difficult to walk up the mountain. The trafficker said if you don't, you will die now, we will kill you.

On the boat there were two hundred people: 67 girls, the rest men and boys. So, after the boat the trafficker took us into the mountains, jungle. The jungle is so deep. It's like a fierce jungle. So, the trafficker separated the girls from the boys. Even if they were husband and wife, they say "The boys cannot mix with the girls. We will take the girls." But we think they take them for rape. You know in Thailand, most of the traffickers rape the girls. (Fieldwork interview with 22-year-old Rohingya man, 2016)

The exploitative material realities of these escapes via the sea become clear in these testimonies. Refugees on the boats become reduced to cargo, or business opportunities for passing pirates as well as smugglers and traffickers. This evokes the imagery of earlier slave ships, where "the slave ship worked as a machine to produce the commodity 'slave' for a global labor market" (Rediker 2007: 338f). In a similar way, refugees fleeing by boat become subject to external forces limiting their escape routes or forcing them aboard vessels not made for such long journeys. This further endangers them and brings them into the orbit of pirates in the case of Vietnamese or traffickers in the case of Rohingya.

### ***Vietnamese Escapes***

When the Vietnamese first started fleeing from Vietnam, they could not rely on a commercial migration infrastructure (Cargill and Huynh 2000); rather, they traveled together with family members and extended kin networks. Many had to find or even build a boat and then sail themselves rather than relying on middlemen and helpers, such as trained boat crews. Often passengers did not bring enough food, as hoarding large reserves for their prospective journeys could have raised the attention of onlookers.

My father went underground and he turned himself to a fisherman. He left Saigon and he went to a fishing village near the sea, and he let his beard grow—grew long and by himself, he built a boat out of plywood, whatever he could get his hand on. He got some engine and take

years—you know, you cannot do it overnight. Years just to gather the material. My brother told us that the boat just have like a little bunker underneath. That's where everybody—420-some-odd people—they all sat like sardine. There's no room to lay down. There were three boats left that night, and my dad was the first boat that went out and they turn on the radio to listen to the weather. And they said the biggest hurricane of the century on the Pacific at that time. And my dad say, doesn't matter, hurricane or not, he went right into the international waterway. (Tran and Vu 2016)

Rather than sailing close to the coast to avoid the open sea, Vietnamese refugees on boats would often head toward the busy international shipping lanes to the east, hoping they would avoid arrest by the Vietnamese coast guards and get rescued by an international freighter as soon as possible. While some were indeed rescued a few days into their perilous journey, many had to continue their passage at sea for months—sometimes many months—suffering from hunger, thirst, and disease before finding safety. Many Vietnamese testified that they encountered boats in international waters, but that help was often not forthcoming from those boats. As one Vietnamese man, the captain of a broken-down refugee boat with ninety-one passengers on board, has stated:

We try to wave and to ask a lot of big ship we have seen to you know to SOS but no one pick it up. So we are adrift in the sea for about four, five days. We have to ration now the water you know and the food we have evenly when people trying to survive. (Pham and Siry 2019)

Given that one of the greatest risks was piracy, which could be seen as rent-seeking at sea, the UNHCR started collecting statistics on piracy in 1981. That year, “452 boats carrying Vietnamese boat people arrived in Thailand carrying 15,479 refugees. 349 of the boats had been attacked by pirates, an average of three times each. 228 women had been abducted and 881 people were dead or missing” (UNHCR 2000: 87). Yet, those referred to as “pirates” were often rather ordinary seafarers and fishermen expecting some kind of reward from the boat people for the help they offered.

Finally, after five days a Malaysian fishing boat approached to us. And they, they are not pirates. They want to make money. So, they ask me for gold in exchange for food and water and in exchange to be pulled back to the shore. So, I have to make a deal with them. And they don't speak English. And I speak little. But we can communicate well. Only thing they demand is gold and girl. Ok, gold and girl. And I say gold is ok, girl no. But they say no, they want both. If I don't provide both, they don't pull us. So, if I give them gold, they will give us water and food. If I give them girl, they will pull [our boat]. No girl, no pull. So,

I don't know what to do. I cannot send girl over there. So, I talk with the people [on board] and some girl, I don't know why, volunteer to go there. And I walk with the girl and talk with the Malaysian fishing people over there and they say ok. I can send girl, but not one. I want to send both men and girl. About ten over there, in their ship. They say ok. And my plan is, if anything happens to the girl then men can try to fight and we maybe jump over there. But luckily the fishermen over there is not really bad, they just want to make a joke, they just want to flirting with the girl, talking. And we still give them gold, whatever they want. We trying to collect all and finally three days of negotiating, you know, hanging around talking, they finally pull me out to the shore. (Pham and Siry 2019)

Those people rescued by commercial freighters were—at least at the beginning of the crisis—taken to Malaysia, Singapore, or Hong Kong, where they were put in refugee camps until a third country accepted them for resettlement. As time passed, the boat people were increasingly ignored out at sea by passing commercial freighters, chiefly because several potential destination countries in the West had declared they had reached the limits of their resettlement capacities and would accept no more refugees. For example, the *Southern Cross*, a Honduras-registered freighter, took on board twelve hundred rescued Vietnamese refugees, intending to disembark those passengers in Malaysia, but was prevented from doing so. When Singapore also declined the captain's request, he took matters into his own hands and sailed to an uninhabited Indonesian island and left his Vietnamese passengers there (Thompson 2010). Given the reluctance of commercial freighters to rescue larger numbers of Vietnamese boat people, more and more Vietnamese set off in smaller boats. Yet, the people in these smaller boats—usually only made for coastal fishing—faced greater dangers at sea, and many did not survive their voyages. When interviewed, former maritime refugee Nicky Tung quoted a Vietnamese saying: “Ten people left, only one survived.” She continued:

I remember when we were floating in the ocean for days without water and we see all these cargo ships passing by. Big giant cargo ships. And we brought out the pots and pans and everything that we have to make noise. We were afraid that they wouldn't be able to see us. And we were just asking, begging for help, begging for any boat to take us, because we were just floating in the ocean. We don't know where we're going. And they saw us, and they didn't pick us up. All they did was just throw water into the ocean, you know, drinking water. Barrels, big barrels of gasoline, big barrels of drinking water, and they just left because they were afraid. And after that experience, I mean seeing those, we were just so disappointed. It's like, how can you let us die out in the ocean

when you were just so desperately needed somebody to rescue us. And they didn't. None of them did. . . . And then, so we were able to reach Indonesia on the second try. And luckily, Indonesia was taking refugees at that time. (Tung 2020)

Over the years, Vietnamese survivors have engaged in a thorough *travail de mémoire*, manifested in rich oral history projects, podcast series, and publicly accessible video interviews, in order to make sure that their struggles for survival at sea will not be forgotten.<sup>1</sup> No such repositories exist yet for the Rohingya.

### **Rohingya Escapes**

Compared to the passages of the Vietnamese, Rohingya experienced longer journeys at sea and staggered migration for several reasons. First, Rohingya journeys were rarely passages of the entire family. Usually men would leave alone first and then get their wives with kids to follow them later, or if they are unmarried, they call for a future wife to come alone, as soon as they can afford to get married. Second, Rohingya passengers are often subject to unscrupulous transporters, who hold them to ransom on the boats to exact more money from their families and friends before they proceed with the journey. Third, the navies of neighboring and destination countries, like Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, regularly engage in pushbacks to sea of boats carrying Rohingya. The Myanmar navy, too, has been engaged in onward towing actions, where they supply stranded vessels with fuel and food to make sure they leave Myanmar waters and make their onward journey down the Malaccan Strait. Consequently, Rohingya are forced to spend more time at sea, and as a result they experience high rates of injuries and deaths from undernourishment, dehydration, and disease (UNHCR 2017, 2021).

For this chapter we focus on survivor testimonies from what has become known as the first Andaman Sea crisis, a maritime standoff over several weeks in May 2015. Since 2012, there have been several such “crises” where pushbacks, severe weather, and political tensions in Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia have conspired to keep Rohingya stranded on boats at sea. Accounts of these boat journeys vary, depending on the treatment by the facilitators/smugglers/traffickers (Carling 2023), and of course, the nature of their enforced togetherness or socialities at sea. The following accounts demonstrate how such socialities can or cannot develop and how these differences in experience affect Rohingya experiences of escape by boat.

The boat journey that one interviewee set out on was terminated and replaced by a prolonged sojourn on an island that functioned just like the

boat in terms of the confinement of Rohingya—that is, it did not allow for place-making but rather constituted a protracted stay in another non-place, thus adding another layer to the deferred place-making. Mohamad was on a small boat making the journey to Malaysia from Myanmar, leaving by night with around forty people on board. The boat was intercepted by the Thai coast guard near Bulu, a small island between Thailand and Malaysia in the Strait of Malacca. The coast guard transferred half of the crew and passengers to the Thai mainland, leaving the remaining eighteen on what the interlocutor described as an uninhabited island, where they were stranded for two weeks. When asked how they survived, he explained:

We ate coconuts and sugar cane. It was uninhabited but there was a sugar cane farm, so we ate the sugar cane for 2 weeks. We shared coconut water, and there were some wells in the sugar cane farm. So, we had to hunt for the wells and some buckets and managed to get some water. We also sucked the juice from sugar cane.<sup>2</sup>

They supplemented the sugar cane diet with some reptiles: “Only monitor lizards and other reptiles. They were as big as Zubair [one of the refugee children with them].” Mohamad went on to explain that:

I was weak and starving. We became emaciated and thin. I thought I was going to die on the island. 10 days after they left us the police came back by boat and brought some food. They brought us back to [Satun, a town on the Thai mainland], because [their smuggler] had paid them off and sent them. I just sat down and counted my beads and prayed to Allah.

On the island the eighteen survivors stranded together had to rely on one another for survival. They cooperated and built a shelter, found and shared food and water while waiting for rescue, all the time unsure that anyone was actually going to come for them. They had no means of communicating or even knowing where they were; their only clue of their whereabouts was that the coast guard had spoken Thai to the smuggler when they were intercepted. Faced with such adversity, the eighteen refugees banded together and found ways to connect beyond rivalry in something akin to forging temporary bonds. This becomes clearer in what happened next for Mohamad:

They brought us by boat from Bulu to Satun. From Satun the police sent the 18 of us back to [the smuggler’s] house nearby. The smuggler said he couldn’t pay for us anymore because he was broke. He told us if we wanted to go back to Burma we should. I stayed at his house 1 week—we all cooked and shared food. [The smuggler] had a soft spot for me and he pitied me so he told me he won’t take money from me

anymore. All the money I owed him for our various unsuccessful attempts to get to Malaysia—he wouldn't take it. (Fieldwork interview with Rohingya religious leader 2016)

Common to stories of flight in the Andaman Sea is the way escape is turned into imprisonment and ransoming of vulnerable refugees. Countless lives were lost in these perilous journeys across the sea, and the stories we collect are consequently only those of survivors, as the following testimony demonstrates:

There are many stories. What my friends and I do and want to do is give information. Information about Malaysia [to those fleeing]. Many are still in trauma from the boat journey and their terrible experiences there. So, they are still in trauma. So, my friends and I always motivate them. We motivate them to get out from the pressure [trauma] that they have. I want them to get out from it and feel like “No. You don't need to feel the pressure, God doesn't allow us to be like that. Continue with your life. Accept the way it is, be grateful and continue with your life with Islamic path. Not to live being gangsters, doing anything bad. Continue life with the shahadah [Islamic faith]. Continue life with Muslim unity.

If you look at my stories, they are interesting and ok. Actually, there are many more horrific stories. My friends and Muslim brothers/sisters experienced far worse. Far worse, and more sad because my family and I were lucky. During the journey, their children, wives, husbands died. They also disappeared when they reached here. In the journey they became victims at sea [drowned]. Look at Wang Kelian [a trafficking camp], many people died. Until now, there is no one statistic that shows clearly how many Rohingya refugees died at sea, on land. But I can tell you although not accurate—actually around 3–4,000 Rohingya died at sea. Many people don't know. Many boats sunk. (Fieldwork interview with Rohingya community leader 2018)

One fisherman had tried to escape Myanmar in a small boat with twelve people on board. They had spent thirty-five days on the water when their boat was intercepted by what they first presumed to be police. It turned out to be smugglers who sold them to traffickers for a ransom in Thailand. One woman reported that men and women were divided on the boat by the traffickers; even families were split up. They were given no water on the day-long crossing so that people would not have to urinate, but some on board began to take water from the ocean to drink and became sick. Another woman noted that her journey took between two and three months from Myanmar to Thailand, during which she changed boats several times. The food rations tended to be sparse, with dry Maggi noodles a key staple provided once a day, along with some water to drink.

While the journeys on the boats are framed by many as harrowing and taxing, the plight continues on land with discrimination, harassment, and violence either in trafficking camps on the Thailand–Malaysia border, where rape, torture, and executions have been documented, or in Malaysian immigration detention sites where detainees are subject to beatings and other corporeal punishments alongside being deprived of food (Hoffstaedter and Missbach 2021). Individual connections based on kin networks can provide some safety for Rohingya on boats; traffickers and smugglers may treat them kindlier or less violently if they know they are related or know someone from their kin network. Yet, even moments of brief privilege or reprieve cannot bridge the fundamental divide between passengers and facilitators on board. Such moments of preferential treatment and sociality provided some refugees with better provisions or more freedom of movement on boats, but remained removed from a shared experience of togetherness or sociabilities that project notions of mutuality and equality (Drotbohm and Winters, introduction to this volume; Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018).

### **Theorizing Prolonged Maritime Boat Journeys: Place-Making in Non-places?**

The evolving dynamics of people on boats are shaped by the temporalities of those journeys but also depend on the specific materialities of the boats used—whether they are dinghies, wooden fishing boats, or freighters. Making refugee boats the center of attention by treating them as a site in their own right and scrutinizing the emerging socialities onboard offers a fresh perspective on the interactions of the passengers aboard as well as those with facilitators, pirates, and rescuers. In doing so, we hope to sharpen our theoretical understanding of refugee trajectories, and particularly the evolving socialities of maritime refugees, by which we mean not only the initial community formation but also the social relations and interactions constituting and constituted by individual priorities and group interests (Ho and Hatfield 2011). When analyzing the boat journeys and the evolving socialities on board, we draw inspiration from two conceptualizations in particular—place-making and the notion of non-places.

Stasis at sea is experienced by Rohingya and Vietnamese as both existential—their main reason for being on the boat is their hope for a better future, as well as real existential threats in Vietnam, in Myanmar, and in the refugee camps in Bangladesh—and literal, as their stay on the boats was always determined by others and outside their control. In both our encounters with Rohingya survivors and the oral history accounts of many Vietnamese survivors we noted the driving force of hope toward a future placement in a

safe third country, Malaysia for many Rohingya and the West more broadly for Vietnamese. The hope for a better life, maybe even more than the fear of persecution, ultimately prompted people to undertake dangerous passages by boat across the sea, because of the “persistence of hope as the bedrock from which courage, tenacity and determination arise” (Nair 2020: 412). In this regard, futurity as the temporal orientation toward unresolved and problematic issues of the past and present, offers a horizon of hope for a meaningful and dignified life somewhere out there, even if it remains a utopian one (Kallio, Meier, and Häkli 2021).

In interviews with Rohingya boat people, we learned that integral to the hope for a better future is the notion of deferred place-making—that is, the vision and imagination of future place-making in a safer place that allows refugees a sense of belonging and all the ingredients inherent in the sociabilities Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2018: 128) describe for their urban migrants: “social relations that provide pleasure, satisfaction, and meaning by giving actors a sense of being human.” This is all in the future and imagined at the point of departure and even after their arrivals, as we learned in interviews, when Rohingya explained why they had opted to come by boat. Hope frames their maritime journey. It is what gets people to board a boat and become indebted to kin and smugglers/traffickers, what sustains them on the perilous journey, and what they bring ashore to their new lives as refugees in Malaysia for Rohingya and the West for Vietnamese refugees. The maritime journey itself we focus on in this chapter is a place where hope in such future place-making sustains the dire present, in full knowledge that any aborted journey will end in a worse fate.

Meanwhile, analyzing the way in which Rohingya and Vietnamese boat people inhabit the space aboard a boat conjures up Augé’s (1995) concept of non-place, a space devoid of the ability to form an organic community or simply to live in. In a recent paper we used this provocation to call attention to how nation-states confronted with an influx of Rohingya refugees via boats created a carceral seascape and relied on the hostility of the sea and boats as non-places to deter more from fleeing (Hoffstaedter and Missbach 2022). The stories documented in this chapter move beyond this structural argument and engage more fully with the aim to uncover the place-making potential and occasional transversal solidarity that makes the voyages sometimes successful or at least possible. Thus, we argue that boats can be hostile spaces for all on board, simply non-places that are required for the movement from one place to another. Nonetheless, these boats are also the only means of escape. As moving objects, refugee boats meander between invisibility and hypervisibility, between being “out-of-the-way” from surveillance and rescue organizations and being “in-the-way” for those who consider refugees a burden and are eager to avoid humanitarian obligations.



This analysis of place-making on the Vietnamese and Rohingya refugee boats concentrates on the locality–sociality nexus. For Vietnamese escaping their country of origin after the fall of Saigon and for Rohingya refugees fleeing refugee camps in Bangladesh or their homeland in Myanmar, the boat is a means to escape and seek passage toward a new life elsewhere. While the passengers on board might not see the boat as a place of sanctuary in and of itself, it is a necessary vehicle used to transgress borders in transit in search for sanctuary.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the limits of place-making for Vietnamese and Rohingya refugees seeking safety by escaping via the sea. We showed that while place-making may be limited, there were also always openings for unexpected interactions—the bravery of the single Vietnamese woman to agree to be bartered for the survival of the rest of the boat passengers—and the ever-present human spirit to survive together—as was the case of the stranded Rohingya cooperating on the deserted island. Thus, the boats carrying Vietnamese and Rohingya refugees may be non-places, as is the sea they traverse, but this does not diminish the human desire for sociabilities to occur, even if this is harder and less likely the longer refugees spend confined together. Being perpetually in motion, even when drifting, boats perhaps represent particular challenges to place-making that territorially grounded places do not face: not least the confinement in a closed space that offers no escape and subsequently has been used by traffickers to detain refugees as well as by national navies to create a carceral seascape in which boats can get trapped. Nonetheless, these boats are integral and instrumental to the transit journeys of refugees from their place of persecution and danger to a place of safety.

As noted in this volume’s introduction “the place-making that happens in these places and co-constitutes each as a place can figure centrally in the experiences, memories, or future orientations of people on the move” (Drotbohm and Winters, this volume). Rohingya refugees rarely talked about their boat journey, and most were left traumatized from the experience and its memories. Some talked about it plainly and as a matter of fact, while others did not want to remind themselves of it. Their orientation was toward the future, on the land in Malaysia they now lived on and in. Perhaps much more time is needed for the memories to become part of the Rohingya history of displacement, genocide, and flight (O’Brien and Hoffstaedter 2020). The instinct for survival is still raw, and they are in no way as settled as the Vietnamese diaspora are in safe third countries with legal

status, citizenship, and a collective history of their journey from Vietnam to safety. Vietnamese oral history repositories, memoirs, and other writing now provides a rich repertoire for remembering and even commemorating the places and modes of escape (Tran 2012). For Rohingya this story is still unfolding through a slow process of writing, recording, and thinking about their journeys from their homelands to safer and more welcoming places. Former Vietnamese maritime refugees have found and made their place in their resettlement countries and built homes, lives, and futures for themselves. Few Rohingya have been resettled, and many Rohingya in Malaysia fear deportation, thus limiting their place-making potential even after their arrival. Some of them might find themselves again on a boat, forced to travel in a new direction.

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## NOTES

1. For example, the *Vietnamese Boat People* podcast, 2018–present (<https://www.vietnameseboatpeople.org/podcast>) and the Vietnamese Oral History Project at University of California Irvine (<https://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/1614>).
2. All these quotes were translated from Malay to English.

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