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Adrift at Sea: The Vietnamese Boat People and the Subject of Asylum

For over two decades, thousands of boat people fleeing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, sought refuge in Hong Kong camps. An evocative phrase, “boat people” describes a means of passage and identifies those who embark upon that passage. Ironically, however, those whom the phrase identifies have no political identity: not only do the governments whom they flee refuse to recognize them. As fugitives, they have no legal status at sea and the only right to asylum they can claim, granted through international maritime law, is often violated. Focusing on visual representations of the Vietnamese boat people, and particularly on the figure of the boat in select memorial exhibitions, this paper considers the implications of this paradox of subjectivity for reconsidering concepts of modern citizenship. The predicament of asylum seekers—boat people—is a symptom of the oscillation between the two categories, man and citizen, categories whose ambivalence can be traced to the founding document of modern citizenship. Because the boat people are legally and politically non-subjects, what identity is designated by this ostensibly identifying phrase? I argue that the figure of the boat, and the people who cling precariously to the uncertain protections it offers, serves as a profound way of navigating between these seemingly irreconcilable terms, man and citizen.