

The “New Frontier”

Settler Imperial Prefigurations and Afterlives of the US War in Vietnam

In his 2019 free-verse poem “Interwoven,” Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez charts archipelagic connections between Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island (North America) and the Pacific Islands. Moving fluidly between first-person singular and second-person and first-person plural pronouns, the first four stanzas of this seven-stanza poem begin by bridging geographies of difference with parallels in experience: “I come from an island / and you come from a continent, / yet we . . .”¹ Grouped together by the repetition of these opening lines, three stanzas about, respectively, resonant Indigenous epistemologies of land and water, linked histories of European invasion and Christian conversion, and communal memories of boarding schools and cultural genocide are followed by a fourth stanza outlining shared experiences of settler colonial “desecration.”² Across nine lines, this fourth stanza maps spatial continuities between Turtle Island and Oceania—“We witnessed minerals, trees, wildlife, / and food crops extracted for profit. / We mourn lands stolen and re-named, / waters diverted and damned”—as well as temporal continuities between the past and the present: “We inherit the intergenerational / loss of removal.”³ Such continuities do not preclude important structural differences, however. The fifth stanza, which begins “I come from an island / and migrated to your continent,” acknowledges that diasporic Pacific Islanders can become migrant settlers, albeit Indigenous ones, on Turtle Island. But shared histories of dispossession can also lead to a collective struggle for self-determination. While acknowledging geographical and historical specificities, the poem emphasizes trans-Indigenous resonances across multiple sites.

In an untitled poem presented at a rally for Gaza in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, on 19 July 2014, Nēhiyaw (Cree) poet Erica Violet Lee adds Palestinians

to Perez's trans-Indigenous archipelago, similarly noting shared experiences of dispossession. She relates her own, First Nation subjectivity to the experiences of Palestinian women, querying the potential for a common struggle. Whereas Perez's poem marks geographies of difference before expressing parallels in experience—"I come from an island / and you come from a continent, / yet we . . ."—Lee asserts parallels in experiences before acknowledging geographies of difference in stanza two: "We both live in occupied territories / But what can I know about you / Half a world away from me."⁴ Stanza three answers this question by indexing how both First Nation and Palestinian "mothers," tasked with protecting the home, hearth, and "memories of the land," are positioned as domestic guardians against the penetration of North American and Israeli colonial state "violence." Stanza four highlights the ongoing and multiplicitous nature of these forced removals, which leave Indigenous subjects "wondering if we'll ever go back."⁵ Such enduring connections with home/land exemplify Indigenous "survivance," which Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor defines as an "active sense of presence" despite centuries of displacement.⁶ Like Perez, Lee interweaves parallel histories of Indigenous dispossession in order to articulate what Steven Salaita calls "inter/nationalism": a "commitment to mutual liberation based on the proposition that colonial power must be rendered diffuse across multiple hemispheres through reciprocal struggle."⁷

Together, these two poems interpolate Indigenous subjects on Turtle Island into the Chamorro-Palestinian archipelago of trans-Indigenous resistance discussed at the end of chapter one. While the previous chapter traced connections between Vietnam, Palestine, and Guam between 1967 and 1975 in order to illuminate the archipelagic nature of US military empire, this chapter highlights the *settler colonial* dimensions of the US War in Vietnam. Taking seriously Jodi A. Byrd's coinage "U.S. settler imperialism née colonialism," as well as Jodi Kim's definition of "settler modernity" as "the nexus of US settler colonialism and military empire in Asia and the Pacific," I argue that US intervention in Vietnam should be understood not only as a Cold War phenomenon but as part of a longer genealogy of American westward expansion across the North American continent, across the Pacific Islands (Guam), and into Asia—both Southeast Asia (Vietnam) and West Asia (Palestine).⁸ In other words, the US settler imperial project that commenced with the thirteen colonies on Indigenous land—Pequot, Mohegan, Nanticoke, Lenni Lenape, Creek, Cherokee, Conoy, Assateague, Susquehannock, Wampanoag, Nauset, Massachuset, Micmac, Abenaki, Pennacook, Iroquois, Algonquian, Hatteras, Catawba, Shawnee, Seneca, Narragansett, Nipmuc, Yamasee, Powhatan—and extended across Turtle Island via pioneer settlement, "railroad colonialism," and the Mexican-American War (1846–48), paved the way for the overseas imperialism that began in 1898.⁹ During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, US settler imperialism disrupted Pacific life-worlds in Guam, the Northern

Mariana Islands, Hawai‘i, the Philippines, Wake Island, the Marshall Islands, eastern Sāmoa, Okinawa, and South Korea—spaces that had already been ravaged by European colonialism or Japanese imperialism, or both—in order to establish an archipelago of US military bases directed toward securing US influence in Southeast Asia. In 1954, this archipelago of US military bases rendered possible settler imperial intervention in Vietnam’s civil war, which would conclude two decades later with Vietnam’s anticolonial unification under communism and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. In short, the “American war story” that culminated in the United States’ “frontier war” in Vietnam originated with the “Indian wars that ‘cleared’ the continent for settlement.”¹⁰ Interlocking structures of both imperialism *and* settler colonialism prefigured the post-1975 resettlement of Vietnamese refugee settlers to Turtle Island, Guam, and Israel-Palestine.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I examine how Vietnam became, in the US settler imperial imagination, what President John F. Kennedy called the “New Frontier,” extrapolating frontier logics finessed on Turtle Island across Oceania and into Southeast Asia. Kennedy’s rhetoric extended the US frontier not only spatially but also temporally, projecting an unending future of US military intervention and occupation abroad. Moreover, as the old frontier had once displaced Native Americans, the “New Frontier” then displaced Vietnamese refugees. Next, I trace Vietnamese refugee resettlement to the so-called “heartland of Empire”: the American Midwest on Anishinaabe lands and waters.¹¹ Analyzing Bich Minh Nguyen’s novel *Pioneer Girl* (2014), I examine how settler imperialism circumscribes what I call *refugee settler desire*: Vietnamese refugees’ desire to identify with white American narratives of pioneer settlement, over and against ongoing Indigenous dispossession, in order to mitigate the trauma of their own forced displacement due to war. Such refugee identification with white pioneer settlement on Turtle Island, however, can, alternatively, be routed through Indigenous epistemologies of place-making, as a dialogical reading of Louise Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* (1999), an Anishinaabe alternative to Laura Ingalls Wilders’ *Little House* books, makes clear. The chapter concludes with a queer Vietnamese American interrogation of refugee settler desire, which relies on heteronormative logics of private property and intergenerational inheritance. Quynh Nguyen-Le’s films *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) (2016) and *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*) (2018) gesture toward more ethical forms of refugee home-making on Indigenous lands and waters. In sum, by engaging both historical and cultural analysis, and grappling with the refugee settler condition in a context perhaps more familiar to American studies scholars, this chapter orients readers for the rest of the book. Whereas part two of the book engages archival materials and oral histories to elaborate the refugee settler condition in Guam and Israel-Palestine, part three turns to cultural production to theorize decolonial potentials for relating otherwise.

THE US WAR IN VIETNAM: "INDIAN" TROPES
IN A COLD WAR CONTEXT

During settler imperial wars such as the Vietnam War, the US military has often referred to enemy territory as "Indian country," reinforcing Byrd's argument that "the United States deploys a paradigmatic Indianness to facilitate its imperial desires."¹² According to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, the term "Indian Country" and its shortened form "In Country," which originated during the Vietnam War, are not merely "insensitive racial slur[s] . . . tastelessly employed by accident," but rather standard "military terms of trade . . . that appear in military training manuals and are used regularly."¹³ This standardization illuminates a longer genealogy of settler imperial violence: how US military tactics used overseas were first developed against Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, in a process Manu Karuka has coined "continental imperialism."¹⁴ But it also facilitates potential solidarities between Native Americans of the original "Indian Country" and the displaced Vietnamese from "In Country"—both targets of settler warfare.

Before these military tactics were deployed in Vietnam but after they originated on Turtle Island, they were finessed across the Pacific. When US Navy admiral George Dewey colonized the Philippines in 1898, following Filipino revolutionaries' declaration of independence from Spain, for example, he described the Filipinos as "Indians," vowing to take over Manila and "keep the Indians out."¹⁵ For some, the comparison felt apt: out of the thirty US generals who served in the Philippines, twenty-six had been officers in the so-called "Indian wars."¹⁶ Before commanding the US army during the Philippine-American War, for example, Major General Nelson A. Miles fought Native American insurgents on Turtle Island.¹⁷ It is unsurprising, then, that the US Army used "counterinsurgency techniques practiced against the Indigenous nations of the North American continent" in the Philippines.¹⁸ And so it continued. Military officers then applied "lessons learned in the Philippines to future imperial ventures," ever expanding the borders of US frontier violence.¹⁹ General Arthur MacArthur, who battled Filipino revolutionary Emilio Aguinaldo, fathered Douglas MacArthur, who served prominently during the Philippine-American War, World War II, and the Korean War—three transpacific ventures that prefigured the US War in Vietnam.²⁰

In his Democratic Party presidential nomination acceptance speech on 15 July 1960, John F. Kennedy also articulated continuities between continental imperialism across Turtle Island and overseas imperialism in Vietnam. Marking his spatio-temporal location at the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles as an inflection point between the old frontier and what he called the New Frontier, Kennedy updated the rhetoric of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis for the Cold War era:

I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. . . . Today

some would say that those struggles are all over—that all the horizons have been explored—that all the battles have been won—that there is no longer an American frontier. But . . . the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won—and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960's—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.²¹

Refusing to accept that “all the horizons have been explored,” Kennedy extended the American frontier imagination westward across the Pacific, identifying “Communist influence” in Southeast Asia and the so-called Middle East as one of the “unknown opportunities and perils” of his New Frontier. Romanticizing the role of continental imperialism in building American character, he advocated a resurgence of frontier energy, calling upon his countrymen to “prove all over again whether this nation . . . can compete with the single-minded advance of the Communist system.” In sum, Kennedy asked his audience to be “pioneers on that New Frontier” who would “race for mastery of the sky and the rain, the ocean and the tides, the far side of space and the inside of men’s minds.”²² Such a Cold War race pitted the United States against the Soviet Union for settler imperial domination over the very air, land, and sea.

In the decades following Kennedy’s “New Frontier” speech, American understandings of the Vietnam War were framed by the “Indian-war metaphor” and the “settlers vs. Indians myth.”²³ By 1967, “American troops would be describing Vietnam as ‘Indian Country’ and search-and-destroy missions as a game of ‘Cowboys and Indians’; and Kennedy’s ambassador to Vietnam would justify massive military escalation by citing the necessity of moving the ‘Indians’ away from the ‘fort’ so that the ‘settlers’ could plant ‘corn.’”²⁴ The “war room” of Admiral Harry D. Felt, commander in chief of Pacific Command from 1958 to 1964, meanwhile, boasted a notice juxtaposing “Injun Fightin’ 1759” and “Counter-Insurgency 1962.”²⁵ During the war, the United States Army Special Forces in Vietnam, also known as the Green Berets, were alternatively characterized as “the shock troops of Kennedy’s New Frontier” and compared to the frontier rangers of the French and Indian Wars of the mid-eighteenth century, or described as fighting “like the Indians” themselves—the only effective way to combat the supposedly “savage” Việt Cộng.²⁶ Attuning to a settler imperial paradigm of white civilizational progress, US leaders interpreted native Vietnamese resistance to US intervention as a rejection of modernity itself.²⁷

Reflecting on the temporal origins of the Vietnam War, Vietnam veteran Michael Herr also compared the Vietnam War to the Indian Wars, but in a critical manner. Insisting that neither 1965, following the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, nor even 1954, the year of Vietnam’s division along the 17th parallel following the defeat of the French at Điện Biên Phủ, was an accurate starting point for the war, Herr instead pointed to the forced displacement of Native Americans during the 1830s and 1840s: “Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing

perimeter.”²⁸ According to Herr, the Trail of Tears foreshadowed US intervention in Vietnam, and the US War in Vietnam pointed back toward the United States’ fraught history of Indigenous genocide. In other words, the Manifest Destiny rhetoric that underwrote the forced removal of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Creek, and Cherokee nations from what is now the southeastern United States also facilitated US settler imperial intervention in Vietnam during the Cold War. During this period, the borders of the New Frontier—what Herr calls the “containing perimeter”—extended beyond the continental United States and Oceania to penetrate Southeast Asia.

Such archipelagic connections between the Indian Wars and the Vietnam War sometimes prompted moments of recognition between Native American decolonization activists and Vietnamese anticolonial revolutionaries. At the 1971 Winter Soldier Investigations, sponsored by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, for example, veteran Evan Haney (Seminole Nation) testified: “The same massacres happened to the Indians. . . . I got to know the Vietnamese people and I learned they were just like us.”²⁹ Haney’s insight was echoed throughout the American Indian Movement of the Long Sixties, which came to fruition alongside roiling anti-Vietnam War protests, thus facilitating connections between continental imperialism on Turtle Island and overseas imperialism in Southeast Asia.³⁰ The seventy-one-day siege of Wounded Knee in 1973, for example, whose participants protested the federal government’s failure to uphold treaty obligations, commemorated the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890, and established the Independent Oglala Nation, was largely sustained by Native Vietnam War veterans, who used guerilla warfare tactics to hold off the US Marshall Service, FBI, and National Guard.³¹ Such domestic use of federal military force against civilian protesters prompted the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee to insist that it would defend the protesters against the “legal reign of terror” until “South Dakota begins to look more like America and less like war torn South East Asia.”³² Meanwhile, newspapers reporting on the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee and the 1890 massacre it referenced drew visual parallels with the US military’s massacre of racialized people in Vietnam, especially during the fifth anniversary of the Mỹ Lai massacre in March 1973. As these news photos made clear, those who dared to stand in the way of US frontier expansion—whether in Oglala territory or Vietnam—faced being murdered.³³

Settler imperial rhetoric continues to circulate in twenty-first-century US politics. President Barack Obama’s inaugural address in January 2009, for example, echoed some of the “New Frontier” rhetoric of Kennedy’s 1960 nomination speech. Praising Americans’ frontier ethic, Obama asserted that the “greatness of our nation” had been “earned” by the “risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things” who “traveled across oceans in search of new life” and “toiled in sweatshops and settled the West.”³⁴ Although he includes Black slaves in this national narrative, they are positioned as “arrivants”: colonized peoples who are nonetheless implicated in the settler colonial dispossession of Indigenous nations.³⁵

In Obama's speech, Native American presence is marked by its stark absence. Consider, for example, the assumptive use of the first-person plural in Obama's description of frontier heroism: "For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh."³⁶ Such comments erase the history of the Indian Wars as wars of continental imperialism, highlighting instead, via synecdoche, the United States' more visible military conflicts: the Revolutionary War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. The reference to the 1968 Battle of Khe Sanh here interpolates the US War in Vietnam into this longer history of Indigenous erasure and positions Vietnam as part of the New Frontier upon which American character was tried and tested, to the benefit of those included in Obama's first-person plural "us"—that is, American beneficiaries of settler imperial expansion. In contrast, Native Americans and their allies continue to fight for Indigenous sovereignty, posing an ethical dilemma for refugees unwittingly resettled on stolen land.

REFUGEE SETTLER DESIRE: NARRATIVES
OF HOME-MAKING IN *LITTLE HOUSE* VERSUS
BIRCHBARK HOUSE

If the US War in Vietnam extended the settler colonial logics of Manifest Destiny across Oceania and into Southeast Asia, then Vietnamese refugees displaced in the aftermath of that war to the continental United States are implicated in the nation's settler imperial genealogy. Vietnamese American literature is well positioned to unpack the interiority of Vietnamese refugees resettled on Indigenous lands and waters—what this book calls the refugee settler condition—as well as to illuminate latent parallels between Indigenous genocide across the US frontier and the mass killing and displacement of Vietnamese subjects across the "New Frontier." Although a growing number of Vietnamese American texts incorporate frontier themes and "cowboys-and-Indians" metaphors to discuss Vietnamese refugee resettlement on Turtle Island, Bich Minh Nguyen's *Pioneer Girl* (2014) is exemplary in its literary depiction of what I call *refugee settler desire*: the urge to mitigate the trauma of forced displacement by rooting oneself in white settler narratives of national belonging.³⁷ In *Pioneer Girl*, whose title references Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiography, main character Lee Lien—daughter of Vietnam War refugees, recent PhD in American literature, and aficionado of Wilder's *Little House* books—seeks to "write herself into an American classic, to claim a material connection with the America embodied by the Wilders."³⁸ In doing so, she eludes other forms of identification, such as with the Anishinaabeg, on whose lands and waters her family finds refuge.

To contextualize the political implications of Lee's identification with the *Little House* books, it is important to understand Wilder's settler status and her books' frontier logics. A descendent of Mayflower immigrants and distant cousin

of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Laura Ingalls was born in a log cabin in western Wisconsin in 1867, nineteen years after statehood.³⁹ In *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), set in 1869, the Ingalls set off for Montgomery County, Kansas—part of the original “Indian Country,” also known as “Indian Territory,” which would later be extrapolated across the Pacific and into Vietnam. Indeed, the first chapter of *Little House on the Prairie*, now called “Going West,” was originally entitled “Going In” (as in, “into Indian Territory”).⁴⁰

In *Little House on the Prairie*, the Ingalls family attempts to settle Osage land. Between 1790 and 1834, Congress had passed six Non-Intercourse Acts, also known as the Indian Intercourse Acts, that forcibly removed federally recognized tribal nations onto government-designated reservations. In 1825, a treaty established the Osage Diminished Reserve in what is now south-central and southeast Kansas. During the 1860s, white settlers began illegally infiltrating the reserve in such great numbers that the Osage appealed to the federal government for military assistance; it promised to relocate the Osage. In 1865, the Osage were pressured into signing the Canville Treaty, which required the United States to sell Osage lands in Kansas on behalf of the tribe at \$1.25 per acre and then purchase new lands in Oklahoma using the proceeds from the sale. Crippled by debt incurred during the Civil War, however, the federal government failed to pay the Osage. By 1868, the Osage, facing starvation, were pressured into renegotiating their relocation agreement and signing the unfavorable Sturgis (Drum Creek) Treaty, which dictated the selling of Osage land directly to the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston (LL&G) Railroad at a reduced price of 20 to 25 cents per acre, in exchange for the purchase of Cherokee lands farther south. However, Congress ultimately refused to ratify the Sturgis Treaty, which favored the railroad barons, because they feared a backlash from white settler constituents who desired access to the land under the Homestead Act of 1862.

During the late 1860s, rumors of the impending opening of so-called Indian Territory reached land-hungry settlers like the Ingalls. Buoyed by an unfaltering sense of white entitlement, they rushed to claim land on the Osage Diminished Reserve, undeterred by the illegality of their actions or the genocidal effects on the Osage. As Pa explains to Laura in *Little House on the Prairie*: “When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. . . . White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick.”⁴¹ According to Pa, frontier settlement was preordained by Manifest Destiny.

Almost a century after the Ingalls’ venture to claim land on the Osage Diminished Reserve, Rose Wilder Lane, daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder and ghostwriter of the *Little House on the Prairie* books, traveled to the so-called In Country of Vietnam in August 1965 to write an article about women’s experiences during the war.⁴² Extending her mother’s pioneer movement across the Pacific into Kennedy’s

New Frontier, Lane would publish the piece, "August in Vietnam," in *Women's Day* in December 1965. *Pioneer Girl* takes the historical fact of Lane's trip to Vietnam as a point of departure, positing an entanglement of Lane and Wilder's *Little House* books with both US settler imperialism in Vietnam and the post-1975 resettlement of Vietnamese refugees on Turtle Island. In the novel, protagonist Lee Lien seeks to solve the mystery of a gold pin left by an American woman named Rose in the Sài Gòn café owned by her "Ong Hai" (grandfather) in 1965.⁴³ Lee is struck by the similarities between this gold pin—treasured as a "gift" by Ong Hai and carried to the United States when he fled Vietnam in 1975—and the pin that Almanzo presents to Laura in *These Happy Golden Years*: "On its flat surface was etched a little house, and before it along the bar lay a tiny lake, and a spray of grasses and leaves."⁴⁴ Embarking on a research trip that takes her across the Midwest and ultimately westward to the gold rush lands of California, retracing the covered wagon trails followed by the Ingalls a century and a half earlier, Lee asks: What if the Rose in her grandfather's memory was actually Rose Wilder Lane? What if her family's refugee story was intimately entangled with the *Little House* narrative?

Far from an impartial research project, what drives Lee is an obsessive desire to uncover a material linkage between her family's story and that of the *Little House* books: "How many times during the years of my *Little House* obsession had I pretended the pin was Laura's secret gift to me?"⁴⁵ Despite the unanswered questions that remain, by the end of the novel, Lee envisions, quite literally, that she has "inherited" the "little house," etched on a gold pin, "from Rose. Whichever Rose that was. Whoever she turns out to be."⁴⁶ Indeed, Lee claims to inherit not just the "little house" pin itself, but the larger white settler narrative embodied in the *Little House* series, evidencing the intergenerational private property logics upon which settler colonialism hinges.

The term *refugee settler desire* describes Lee's quest to mitigate the trauma of her own refugee family's displacement and loss of home(land)—indeed, the loss of a "little house"—by tethering their story to Lane and Wilders' quintessential settler narrative of US frontier expansion. Consider this passage from *Pioneer Girl*'s second chapter:

So much immigrant desire in this country could be summed up, quite literally, in gold: as shining as the pin Rose had left behind. A promise taken up, held on to for decades, even while Sam and I were reckless with our own history, searching for things we couldn't yet name. If this Rose was the same Rose of the *Little House* books, the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, then she had defined a part of American desire that my mother understood just as well.⁴⁷

Here Lee articulates a particular "immigrant desire" to claim belonging in the American landscape. What Rose leaves to Lee's family, and what Lee and her brother Sam search for but "couldn't yet name," is a "promise": the promise of multicultural inclusion into the US settler state.

But what if we disaggregate the conflation between “immigrant” and “refugee” that Lee articulates here, and pinpoint more precisely the contours of refugee settler desire? The passage above is preceded by a description of Lee’s mother and grandfather’s displacement from Vietnam, which can be more accurately characterized not as immigrant mobility but as refugee flight “out of Vietnam, back when the city of Saigon was crumbling around them.”⁴⁸ Indeed, later in the novel Lee postulates that the reason first her mother and then she “held on” so tightly to “that gold pin” was that their own origins were “lost through language and war.”⁴⁹ Displaced from little house and homeland, Lee attempts to mitigate her family’s refugee loss by interweaving her story with that of white pioneer settlement, holding on to the gold pin as an inherited “promise” of inclusive resettlement in the continental United States.

This project of Vietnamese refugee home-making, which seeks inclusion in the white pioneer myths of the US’s foundational national narratives, ultimately risks reproducing the settler colonial violence upon which these myths are built, however. Indeed, by desiring to identify with white pioneer settlement rather than Native American stories of place, Lee unwittingly internalizes the very Manifest Destiny logic that justified US settler imperial expansion across Oceania into Vietnam in the first place—a logic that instigated the very refugee *unsettlement* that she seeks to mitigate throughout the novel.

In *Pioneer Girl*, Lee does acknowledge that the *Little House* series celebrates pioneer resilience and frontier adventure at the expense of Indigenous displacement. For example, she expresses sympathy for the “Osage Indians whose lands are being threatened” and notes that “Ma repeatedly says she hates Indians, while Pa is all about negative capability: he has respect for the leaders, makes a point to learn some of their customs, yet he also believes that their land should be his by right of whiteness.”⁵⁰ Although *Little House on the Prairie* isolates explicitly genocidal rhetoric like “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” to Pa’s character foil of Mr. Scott, the entire book is underwritten by a settler imperial celebration of the pioneering frontier man.⁵¹ Osage writer Dennis McAuliffe further critiques the way Wilder and Lane represent the Osages as “beggars and thieves,” compare them to “reptiles, to garbage or scum,” and assign them “descriptive adjectives that connote barbarism, brutality, and bloodthirstiness,” making “much ado about their odor.”⁵² Osage loss—of land, lifestyle, and livelihood—only garners cursory mention in *Little House on the Prairie*. By extension, Nguyen’s *Pioneer Girl* implicitly posits Indigenous displacement as an unfortunate but unavoidable precondition for refugee resettlement in the settler imperial United States.

Indeed, in the novel Lee’s critiques of Manifest Destiny, white settler entitlement, and Indigenous displacement are ultimately eclipsed by the seemingly more pressing issue of racial exclusion. In chapter 14, when Lee finally attempts to explain her research project on Rose Wilder Lane and the mysterious gold pin to her skeptical mother and sympathetic but confused grandfather, she posits

that the central violence of white settlement was not the settler colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples such as the Osage but the white supremacist *exclusion* of nonwhite subjects from "the American story." Subsuming the specificity of refugee displacement into a larger immigrant narrative, Lee explains: "I wanted to tell them that my own concept of American history had been unknowingly shaped just by reading those [*Little House*] books, that they had rooted me in a paradox of pride and resentment—a desire to be included in the American story and a knowledge of the limits of such inclusion. Like the Chinese workers who helped build the transcontinental railroad and yet were left out of pictures and edged out of history."⁵³ Tellingly, the Osage remain excluded, both from "the American story" so desired by Lee, the daughter of Vietnam War refugees, and from Lee's retelling of the limits of inclusion in such a story. Rather than juxtapose refugee and Indigenous displacement, Lee instead reaches for pan-ethnic racial identification with the "Chinese workers" who unwittingly contributed to railroad colonialism during the late nineteenth century.⁵⁴ In so doing, Lee attributes her family's exclusion from "the American story" to the failure of multiracial inclusion, rather than to the violence of settler imperialism. By extension, she negates any potential identification with the displaced Osage of *Little House on the Prairie*, positing the two structural positions—refugee and Indigenous—and their attendant structures of domination—US imperialism and settler colonialism—as distinct rather than entangled formations. By inserting her own Vietnamese refugee settler "picture" into the "American story," she inadvertently edges out Indigenous histories and presences.

Lee's privileging of the problem of multiracial inclusion in *Pioneer Girl* is informed by author Bich Minh Nguyen's childhood experiences growing up in the Midwest during the 1980s, as chronicled in her 2007 memoir, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*. Nguyen details her family's refugee flight from Vietnam in spring 1975 when she was not yet one year old, and their archipelagic passage through refugee camps in Guam, the Philippines, and Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, before eventual resettlement in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Throughout the memoir, Nguyen's central source of anxiety is her racial exclusion from the predominantly white, conservative, Christian communities of Michigan and her desire to assimilate into white American culture via the consumption of American fast foods—Pringles, Toll House cookies, American meat—whose names make up the majority of the memoir's chapter titles. It is only toward the end of the memoir, as Nguyen comes to terms with her Vietnamese heritage and the Mexican culture of her stepmother, Rosa, that more "ethnic" foods are featured as chapter titles: "Holiday Tamales," "Mooncakes," "Cha Gio."

In chapter 11, entitled "Salt Pork" in honor of *Little House on the Prairie*, Nguyen describes her own childhood obsession with the *Little House* books and her identification with the protagonist, Laura Ingalls: "After I read the *Little House* books I began to pretend that bacon was salt pork and that I was Laura herself. She

was short and small like me, and she savored every last touch of the salt on her tongue.”⁵⁵ This parallelism in palates and stature is but a synecdoche of the larger connections that Nguyen identifies between her life and that of the Ingalls family: “In many ways, their pioneer life reminded me of immigrant life. As they search for new homesteads, they, too, experience isolation and the scramble for shelter, food, work, and a place to call home.”⁵⁶ Again conflating immigrant and refugee positionalities, Nguyen’s assertion of parallel searches for “a place to call home” elides the different *causes* of such a search for refugees displaced by war versus pioneers driven by settlement of Indigenous lands and waters.

Growing up in Michigan, Nguyen looked up to the Ingalls as “the epitome of American” and envied their “righteous belief in the idea of home, in the right to land, in the life of farming”—in other words, Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian ideal, later legislated in 1862 via the Homestead Act and further promoted by Turner’s frontier thesis.⁵⁷ As she grew older, Nguyen admits, she had “an increasingly uneasy time reading the books,” though the central issue she critiques is not settler imperial violence but domestic “racism”: “Ma Ingalls’s hatred of Indians” as well as Pa’s vaudeville performance of blackface in *Little Town on the Prairie*. Although Indigenous studies scholars have cautioned against reducing Indigeneity to racial difference, in this passage Nguyen attributes Ma’s hatred of the Osage to interpersonal racism rather than the structure of settler colonialism, even though Indigenous peoples are not another minority group pursuing multicultural inclusion but rather independent nations fighting for sovereignty. Marking her family’s similarities with the Osage and African Americans via shared experiences of racial exclusion rather than settler imperialism, Nguyen reflects, “I knew that people like me would also have been considered outcasts, heathens, and strangers; we didn’t even count.”⁵⁸ Such refugee settler desire to “count,” however, is ultimately an example of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism”: that which refugees cannot achieve but cannot help but desire.⁵⁹ Nguyen concludes the chapter: “Drawn to what I could not have, I kept seeking out landscapes in which I could not have existed. Deep down, I thought I could prove that I could be a more thorough and competent white girl than any of the white girls I knew.”⁶⁰ In the continental United States, refugee settler desire for belonging is entangled with an aspiration for whiteness: a desire to exceed at whiteness, to write oneself into white spaces, and to inevitably, if unintentionally, reproduce the white settler logics of Indigenous displacement.

In sum, both Nguyen’s novel *Pioneer Girl* and her memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, explore parallels between refugee and pioneer narratives—and, by extension, structural antagonisms between refugee and Indigenous subjects. Although both the novel and the memoir critique the Manifest Destiny rhetoric and white entitlement depicted in the *Little House* books, this critique does not extend to the structural violence of settler imperialism. Indeed, both *Pioneer Girl* and *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* ultimately subordinate a critique of Indigenous dispossession to

the seemingly more pressing goal of refugee inclusion in the US body politic: a pattern that is repeated in the secondary literature surrounding these texts.⁶¹

In *Pioneer Girl*, what motivates Lee's identification with Laura in the *Little House* series is not only a shared aspiration for (re)settlement but, counterintuitively, a feeling of perpetual *restlessness*: movement, displacement, exile, the perennial inability to ever feel settled or at home. Lee notes "a deep restlessness threading the *Little House* books together. Pa Ingalls is anxious to keep looking for a better homestead, to keep searching out the treasured West, and Laura too has that 'itchy wandering foot.' Perhaps her daughter Rose was able to translate and convey these feelings so well because she had grown up caged in her own desires, if not for westward exploration, then for worldliness, fame, glory, a life beyond the farm and small-town Missouri."⁶²

Laura Ingalls's early childhood was one of constant movement: born in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, she traveled with her family through Missouri, Kansas ("Indian Country"), Minnesota, and Iowa before settling in De Smet, Dakota Territory, in 1879.⁶³ According to Lee, she and her brother "felt that restlessness too. The desire to be free of our family's choices, even though at the same time we knew how much we owed—our very existence—to them."⁶⁴ Laura's long list of midwestern homesteads is paralleled by Lee's own list of midwestern towns in which she grew up: Le Porte, Indiana; Battle Creek, Michigan; Naperville, Illinois; Joliet, Illinois; Waukesha, Wisconsin; Valparaiso, Indiana; Franklin, Illinois. Displaced from Vietnam as refugees, Lee's mother and grandfather elude traditional settlement, driving across the midwestern states with Lee and her brother in tow, in perpetual search of a better restaurant venture to replace the beloved Café 88 of Ong Hai's 1960s Sài Gòn. Throughout the novel, Lee feels haunted by this "old anxiety: my mother and grandfather, also searching, landing, restive in the Midwest."⁶⁵ In other words, Lee inherits her mother's intergenerational trauma of refugee restlessness: "Once in flight [my mother] was always in flight, glancing uneasily around before pushing on to another vista that promised better prospects. Maybe it kept her feeling safe. She couldn't have known that it would leave [my brother] and me feeling the opposite—permanently unsettled, unable to know what could be called home."⁶⁶ Like settler colonialism, refugee unsettlement is more akin to a structure than an event. It does not dissipate with the moment of arrival, but rather continues to haunt succeeding generations.

But does this sense of "deep restlessness" shared by Lee's family and the Ingalls—a modality of continual *unsettlement*—undermine the violence of settler imperialism, or merely obfuscate and perpetuate it? Afterall, restlessness in the name of "westward exploration" or even "worldliness, fame, glory" is quite different from restlessness due to refugee displacement. The two rest on different logics of mobility and distinct planes of racial privilege. At the end of the novel, Lee identifies "restlessness" as a profoundly American experience—one that connects her family's refugee narrative to a longer genealogy of frontier expansion:

So far I have spent almost half of my life studying and thinking about American literature, and the landscape has seemed one of incredible, enduring, relentless longing. Everyone is always leaving each other, chasing down the next seeming opportunity—home or body. Where does it stop? Does it ever? I want to believe it all leads to something grander than the imagination, grander than the end-stop of the Pacific. Or is that it: You get to the place where you land; you are tired now; you settle. You settle. You build a home and raise a family. There are years of eating and arguing, working and waking. There are years of dying. No one knows what the last image will be.⁶⁷

Here, the frontier myth of the West—invoked by the “end-stop of the Pacific”—seemingly concludes in settlement: “You get to the place where you land; you are tired now; you settle.” And yet the passage continues, suggesting an unfixed future: “No one knows what the last image will be.” On one hand, this invocation of another image after “the end-stop of the Pacific” references the extension of US settler imperialism beyond the West Coast, across Oceania, and into the “New Frontier” of Vietnam. The last line of the novel, after all, invokes a “hoped-for landscape that always lies just beyond the west.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, the suggestion here of a not-yet-visible futurity marks an opening for alternative forms of identification between Vietnamese refugees displaced by war and Indigenous refugees displaced by frontier settlement. Neither settler imperialism nor refugee settler desire are inevitable: “No one knows what the last image will be.”

Instead of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “little house,” I propose that the character Lee Lien, and by extension Vietnamese American refugee settlers, consider a different abode: a birchbark house, built by the Anishinaabe of Moningwanaykaning, Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker in Lake Superior, off the coast of present-day Wisconsin. Anishinaabe author Louise Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* (1999) has widely been regarded as an alternative to the *Little House* books: a mid-nineteenth-century story of frontier encounters, as told from an Indigenous perspective. Born on 7 June 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, Erdrich, like Wilder, grew up in the so-called Midwest. While her father’s family hailed from Germany, her mother’s came from the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, where her grandfather was a tribal chair and traditional dancer.⁶⁹ According to Anishinaabe scholar Margaret Noodin, Erdrich “speaks in circles about Anishinaabe language and identity the way a crow flies searching, the way a sunflower’s seeds spiral, the way seasons cycle—with subtle, undeniable purpose.”⁷⁰

Based on the life of Erdrich’s great-grandmother, *The Birchbark House* tells the coming-of-age story of seven-year-old Omakayas.⁷¹ Seven is a significant number in Anishinaabemowin in that it “represents the number of ways to specify who is present as a speaker, audience, initiator, or object. . . . The seventh prophecy of the Anishinaabe, made by the seven grandfathers, foretells a rebirth among the people.”⁷² Set on and around Moningwanaykaning in 1847, *The Birchbark House* takes place ten years after Michigan became a state, one year before Wisconsin statehood, and twenty years before Laura Ingalls Wilder was born. By this

time, the Three Fires Anishinaabe Confederacy—a long-standing alliance of the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Potawatomi—had been flourishing in the Great Lakes region for more than a thousand years.⁷³ Although the 1795 Treaty of Greenville had defined the boundary between the confederacy and the fifteen American states then in existence, *The Birchbark House* marks a moment of transition: a complex multicultural society of Anishinaabe and French traders soon to be disrupted by the encroaching *chimookoman* (white people), who bring smallpox and divide the land into private allotments. The following three books in Erdrich's series chronicle multiple displacements: the Sandy Lake Massacre of 1849, Omakayas's family's journey west to escape settler violence, and her later-in-life move farther west to live with the Métis of the Red River Valley.⁷⁴ Despite these displacements, the Anishinaabeg have persisted, and today, more than two hundred Anishinaabe nations are recognized across the United States and Canada.

Like many Anishinaabe stories, *The Birchbark House* is organized around the four seasons. Four is another important number in Anishinaabe epistemology, reflecting the four primary verb forms and the four cardinal directions.⁷⁵ The book's fourteen chapters are divided into four sections, entitled *Neebin*, *Dagwaging*, *Biboon*, and *Zeegwun*—four verbs, rather than nouns, that depict when the seasons *become* summer, fall, winter, and spring, respectively.⁷⁶ A standalone prologue, entitled "The Girl from Spirit Island," sets up the central mystery of the text. The first sentence reads: "The only person left alive on the island was a baby girl."⁷⁷ Ravaged by smallpox, "a sickness brought by the chimookoman," the Anishinaabeg of Spirit Island had all passed away except for this unnamed baby girl.⁷⁸ Chapter One, "The Birchbark House," opens on a different island, Moningwanaykaning, and introduces the book's main character: "She was named Omakayas, or Little Frog, because her first step was a hop."⁷⁹ Throughout *The Birchbark House*, the reader is left to puzzle the relationship between the prologue's unnamed baby girl and the book's body chapters, which chronicle Omakayas's adventures and her growth as a healer. It is not until the last chapter, "Full Circle," that Erdrich reveals that Omakayas is indeed the "Girl from Spirit Island."

I share the story of *The Birchbark House* to propose an alternative source of identification for *Pioneer Girl*'s Lee Lien, who feels haunted by her mother and grandfather's refugee displacement and inability "to know what could be called home" in the lands of the Three Fires Anishinaabe Confederacy, also known as the Midwest.⁸⁰ In some ways, Omakayas mirrors Laura Ingalls in *Little House on the Prairie*. *The Birchbark House* chronicles Omakayas's relationships with her siblings (including her pretty older sister, Angeline, reminiscent of Mary Ingalls) and her friendships with multiple animals. Like Laura, and by extension Lee, Omakayas is also shaped by a particular sense of restlessness: her family moves each season, constructing new houses and adapting to new threats posed by the encroaching *chimookoman*. But Omakayas's restlessness differs from that of the Ingalls. Omakayas's family's movement follows the patterns of the seasons,

rather than the fantasy of frontier expansion: the building of a birchbark house in the summer, the canoe trek to a ricing camp in Kakagon in the fall, the construction of a cedar house in the winter, and the journey to a maple-sugaring camp on the other side of the island in the spring. Attuned to these seasonal patterns, Omakayas's family's archipelagic movement across multiple islands is shaped by a profound relationship to land and water, rather than an individualistic drive toward ownership and settlement. In sum, while "Wilder's stories depict the woods and the prairie as unsettled and unsettling," Erdrich's books "depict these places as home, harvest, and a web of comfort."⁸¹

In other ways, Omakayas is similar to Lee and thus bypasses Laura Ingalls as a mediating figure. Like Lee's family, who fled Vietnam in the wake US intervention and communist unification, Omakayas is also a refugee, driven from Spirit Island by the smallpox spread by the *chimookoman*. Indeed, Lee is not actually—or, rather, not only—a "pioneer girl" but also a daughter of displaced refugees whose own narrative intersects with that of Omakayas along this shared narrative of refugeehood. Refugeehood, however, does not preclude Omakayas's ability to establish a place-based sense of belonging in the Great Lakes region. And so, perhaps, Lee, and by extension Vietnamese American refugee settlers, can learn from Omakayas, substituting an identification with the white pioneer narrative of Laura Ingalls Wilder with an Anishinaabe epistemology of dwelling in place in order to quell her anxieties regarding perpetual restlessness. Erdrich writes:

She couldn't help being just who she was. Omakayas, in this skin, in this place, in this time. Nobody else. No matter what, she wouldn't ever be another person or really know the thoughts of anyone but her own self. She closed her eyes. For a moment, she felt as though she were falling from a great height, plunging through air and blackness, tumbling down with nothing to catch at. With a start of fear, she opened her eyes and felt herself gently touch down right where she was, in her own body, here.⁸²

Refugee flight can also feel like "falling from a great height, plunging through air and blackness, tumbling down with nothing to catch at." But refugee settler desire for a sense of belonging to counteract the fear associated with this fall need not necessarily take on the contours of frontier settlement—Manifest Destiny, white entitlement, and individualist ownership of the land. Instead, it can aspire toward bodily situatedness, as articulated by Omakayas via Erdrich. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Lee "play Indian"—a mode of parody interwoven with Native conquest and dispossession—but rather respectfully learn from the Anishinaabeg, on whose lands her family resettled.⁸³ Lee, daughter of Vietnam War refugees, might then be able to mitigate her family's sense of restlessness, the fear of the fall, by pausing to dwell "in her own body, here." Here, in the Midwest on Anishinaabe lands and waters, she can perhaps come to rest, cognizant of the interwoven nature of refugee and Indigenous displacement.

According to Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Anishinaabe understandings of Indigenous sovereignty are grounded in forms of relationality:

I asked an Elder Gidigaa Migizi from Waashkigamaagki the word for “nation” or “sovereignty” or even “self-determination” in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe language). He thought for a long time, and then he told me that he remembered his old people saying “Kina Gchi Anishinaabe-ogaming,” which was understood to mean, “the place where we all live and work together.” On the surface, it seemed to me like such a simple answer, a description of sovereignty and nationhood that is at its core about relationships—relationships with each other and with plant and animal nations, with our lands and waters and with the spiritual world.⁸⁴

Indigenous sovereignty can encompass refugee resettlement, insofar as refugees interrogate their refugee settler desire to identify with white settler narratives of nation-state belonging. The following section analyzes two films by Quỳn Nguyễn-Le in order to highlight the importance of “queer dis/inheritance” as a method of refusing the intergenerational perpetuation of settler colonial violence.⁸⁵

NƯỚC AND HOÀI: QUEER INTERROGATIONS OF REFUGEE SETTLER DESIRE

Pioneer Girl's depiction of refugee settler desire is, I argue, emblematic of many Vietnamese Americans' response to the refugee settler condition: they embrace white settler narratives to mitigate the trauma of refugee uprooting, often failing to recognize connections between their forced displacement from the “New Frontier” of Vietnam and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. While calls for decolonial solidarity between Vietnamese Americans and Native Americans are growing, coalition still remains challenging for many to articulate.⁸⁶ I therefore turn to *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) (2016) and *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*) (2018), two experimental short films directed by queer Vietnamese American filmmaker Quỳn Nguyễn-Le, to think through more ethical forms of refugee home-making in the continental United States. Cultural production offers blueprints for unsettling the refugee settler condition and relating otherwise; whereas this section focuses on emergent solidarities across Turtle Island, part three of the book will develop this methodology in regard to Guam and Israel-Palestine.

Hoài (*Ongoing, Memory*), cowritten with Ly Thúy Nguyễn, explicitly addresses Vietnamese refugee resettlement across Indigenous lands and waters. *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*), on the other hand, grapples with the inherited images of war that produced refugee flight from Vietnam in the first place, providing a crucial context for querying refugee settler desire. Read together, archipelagically, these two films demonstrate how the afterlives of the Vietnam War shape contemporary refugee and Indigenous struggles. Via bilingual discourse and nonlinear dream

sequences, the films interweave Vietnam and Turtle Island, past and present, refugeehood and resettlement.

Pairing stunning visuals with bilingual dialogue, simultaneously subtitled in English and Vietnamese, both *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) and *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*) feature genderqueer Vietnamese American protagonists and their relationships with their widowed refugee parents and progressive, mixed-race girlfriends. Whereas *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) portrays a photographer grappling with the excess of Vietnam War imagery—images that threaten to drown out the quiet narrative of their own refugee mother—*Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*) depicts a broken-hearted activist arguing with their refugee father about the Vietnamese American community's role in protesting President Donald Trump's "America First" policies: the 2017 Muslim Ban and the imprisonment of undocumented Central American refugee children along the US-Mexico border. *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) commences in a darkroom displaying signature black-and-white photos from the US War in Vietnam: Eddie Adams's 1968 photo of South Vietnamese major general Nguyễn Ngọc Loan shooting Việt Cộng prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém; Nick Út's 1972 Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, also known as the "napalm girl"; Bernie Boston's 1967 Flower Power photo of American antiwar protesters placing carnations in soldiers' gun barrels; and an iconic photo of Vietnamese boat refugees. In the middle of these famous photographs is a closeup photo of the unnamed protagonist's mother's face. The other film, *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*), begins with a closeup shot of the eponymous main character Hoài's face against a geographically ambiguous blue sky. Hoài begins to slip and fall backward just as the camera cuts to black.

Both films grapple with the difficulty of translating across language, geography, generation, and political orientation. In *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*), the protagonist speaks in English while their mother responds in Vietnamese. Although the two understand each other at the level of daily pleasantries, they do not have a shared language to discuss memories of war: "How do you ask about trauma when you don't even speak the same language anymore?"⁸⁷ In *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*), Hoài and their refugee father begin by speaking exclusively in their respective languages, and this leads to a generational clash: Hoài argues with their father, who warns that if Hoài joins their ex-girlfriend in punching white supremacists at political protests, Hoài will get arrested. In the final dialogue of the film, however, Hoài attempts faltering Vietnamese and their father responds in accented English. It is via this shared bilingual language that the two begin to articulate a cross-generational ethic of queer refugee home-making across Indigenous lands and waters.

The two films' genderqueer Vietnamese American protagonists also clash with their respective girlfriends about American left-wing interpretations of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. In *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*), the girlfriend asserts, "Vietnam was such a mistake"—a comment that centers American perspectives and erases the South Vietnamese struggle for an independent democratic state.⁸⁸



FIGURE 4. Film still from *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*), directed by Quỳn Nguyen-Le. Poster art by Demian DinéYazhi'. Image courtesy of Quỳn Nguyen-Le.

Hurt and offended, the protagonist responds, “Vietnam’s a country, not a war. . . . You just ignored all Vietnamese people.” Confused, having expected the protagonist to agree with her seemingly progressive statement, the girlfriend responds defensively: “All I’m saying is we shouldn’t have been there.” But the main character retorts: “We weren’t there. It was a real thing that happened to real people like my mom. Don’t idealize it.”⁸⁹ Isolating the “we” to the two in dialogue, the protagonist questions the girlfriend’s presumed “we” as inclusive of all Americans, across time and regardless of race. Instead, the protagonist recenters the specificity of the South Vietnamese refugee experience: those who lived through the war and experienced betrayal at the hands of retreating US allies.

Hoài (*Ongoing, Memory*) also depicts an argument between a progressive girlfriend, now an ex, and Hoài. This former girlfriend’s intersectional leftist politics are established by her apartment’s wall decorations: a “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” poster, a “No Ban on Stolen Land!” protest sign, and black-and-white poster art by Diné artist Demian DinéYazhi’ that declares: “This land: is not your land, was not your land, will never be your land.”⁹⁰ While the first image references the cross-racial solidarity of the Vietnam War era, the latter two highlight an Indigenous critique of settler imperialism, foreshadowing the film’s concluding dialogue, which interrogates refugee settler desire. This ex-girlfriend, in the interim, criticizes Hoài’s father’s concern about joining the protests: “You know, you’d think Vietnamese people would have more radical politics given the atrocity of the Vietnam War.”⁹¹ This comment again misrepresents the South Vietnamese experience of US allyship and refugee displacement, a past that intimately shapes multiple generations of Vietnamese Americans’ relationships to the war.

Interestingly, while the arguments between the two protagonists and their respective girlfriends are never resolved on-screen, both *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) and *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*) conclude with dialogues of resolution between the protagonists and their respective parents. In both films, such resolutions are made possible by mediating dream sequences, or queer dis-orientations, that challenge the linear logics of settler colonial accumulation and interpolate the protagonists

into their respective parents' experiences of war and resettlement, via what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory."⁹² The dream sequence in *Nước* (*Water/Home-land*) is not a diegetic dream—the protagonist never falls asleep on screen—but rather a surrealist succession of moving images extrapolated from the signature black-and-white photographs hanging to dry in the opening scene's darkroom. Invoking the power of *nước* as an analytic, Ly Thúy Nguyễn notes, "the film's surreal style feels like a paper boat floating on water, and yet sternly anchors at the heavy questions of unspoken loss."⁹³ The dream sequence begins with a moving image of the protagonist's girlfriend as a Flower Power antiwar protester. This is followed by a series of quick shots of the protagonist as Major General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan shooting Nguyễn Văn Lém; as Nick Út shooting a photograph; and as a dark silhouette against a red curtain clinging precariously to an exposed umbilical cord, while the famous sex worker scene from Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* is projected across their body. This last image ends when the umbilical cord, symbolizing Vietnamese refugees' attachments to their lost motherland, snaps, causing the protagonist to fall backward into a black void. A quickly flashed image of the protagonist's mother working in a nail salon precedes the final shot of the protagonist as a drowning boat refugee, saved by the outstretched hand of their mother. In this dream sequence, generational positions are queered, the space of war bleeds into the space of escape by boat, and the shooting of a photograph is compared to the shooting of a gun: a warning against the violent potential for Vietnam War images to overdetermine the complex subjectivity of Vietnamese refugees.

The three diegetic dream sequences in *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*), in contrast, focus less on the war itself than on refugee escape and resettlement. In the first dream (which, following the film's nonlinear chronology, is actually connected to the third), Hoài is lying on the sand, their hair extending toward a tangle of seaweed, on the beach near the US-Mexico border wall that extends into the Pacific Ocean—recalling the image of the "end-stop of the Pacific" that concludes Nguyen's *Pioneer Girl*. In the second dream sequence, images of intimacy with the ex-girlfriend are followed by a photograph of Hoài's deceased mother, which is then interrupted by a close-up shot of Hoài's upper body suddenly being drenched in water, as if from a wave: a sensation that causes them to start awake, soaked in sweat. In the third dream sequence, the images of queer intimacy return, but are preceded first by the photograph of Hoài's mother, then by an image of Hoài's father hiding in a rice field in Vietnam while a US military helicopter flies across the sun. The helicopter in this last image sutures Vietnam to Turtle Island: the camera drops from the helicopter back down to the earth to capture an image of the father washed ashore on the same beach, near the US-Mexico border wall, that Hoài was lying on in the first dream, drawing parallels between Vietnamese and Central American refugees and reminding viewers that settler imperialism in Vietnam is interwoven with continental imperialism across the *Américas*. This final dream sequence ends with a scene of Hoài falling, out of the arms of the ex-girlfriend,

through the wooden floor that provided the backdrop of the second dream's shock of water, and onto their bed—a scene that calls to mind the image, in *Nước (Water/Homeland)*'s own dream sequence, of the Vietnamese American protagonist falling into a black void, as well as the image of Omakayas "falling from a great height, plunging through air and blackness, tumbling down with nothing to catch at" in *The Birchbark House*.⁹⁴ Falling, across these three forms of cultural production, is symbolic of displacement: by war, by lost love, by frontier expansion. Together, the three dream sequences in *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* beautifully layer multiple experiences of loss—Hoài's loss of love, the father's loss of a homeland, and the pair's loss of their mother/wife—as well as the multiple interconnected political issues at stake in the contemporary moment: Vietnamese refugee resettlement, Indigenous displacement, Central American refugee migration to the US-Mexico border, and Islamophobic backlashes against Muslim immigration to the United States. *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* ends with a single dream-like image of Hoài again on the beach, this time looking directly at the US-Mexico border wall: a survivor no longer falling, but rather standing in strength, buoyed by their father's refugee resilience and ready to fight for other displaced peoples. In the words of Lee Lien in *Pioneer Girl*: "No one knows what the last image will be."⁹⁵ Refugee survival can beget refugee struggle on behalf of future refugees.

The wordless dream sequences in *Nước (Water/Homeland)* and *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* facilitate the intergenerational resolutions articulated at the end of each film. In *Nước (Water/Homeland)*, the protagonist and their mother never explicitly talk about the war. However, their silence is bridged via a cross-generational sharing of sustenance. Sitting at the kitchen table together eating *cháo* (rice porridge), the mother recalls her own mother cooking *cháo* for her in Vietnam and offers to cook *cháo* for the protagonist's girlfriend, "a gesture that we can read as latent recognition and acceptance of a queer lineage."⁹⁶ In this way, the film affirms the main character's assertion that "Vietnam's a country, not a war." "Vietnam," in other words, need not be defined by iconic photographs of violence, but can instead encompass intergenerational acts of queer domesticity, that do not reproduce the heteronormative nuclear family structure. The concept of *nước*, meanwhile, is directly referenced by the rain falling outside the kitchen window: water that connects this domestic scene to the final image in the preceding dream sequence, of the mother pulling the drowning protagonist into a boat—only in this surrealist reinterpretation of Vietnamese boat refugee passage, the boat is stranded in a desert. The desert's dry land suggests a stuck-ness—an inability to move from the in-between space of refugeehood. Untethered from the homeland of Vietnam, yet still out of reach of a new home, the boat is temporarily immobile. Rain, however, promises newfound water, a rising sea, that can carry the refugee boat to new life. But new life need not be divorced from the homeland, understood as *nước*. According to Lan Duong, "Water is the liquid encasement that fuses together mother with motherland and life with feminist lineage; it is water that binds the

diasporic subject to her mother/land.”⁹⁷ Indeed, rain, as *nước*, connects Vietnam, the space of refugeehood, to the domestic space of the kitchen, suggesting a queer ethic of archipelagic home-making for displaced refugees.

But what if the domestic scene of resettlement takes place on Indigenous land? The final dialogue in *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* addresses this issue, which is foreshadowed by the Indigenous sovereignty posters hanging in Hoài’s ex-girlfriend’s apartment. Shot through the doorway, interspersed with close-ups of Hoài and their father’s faces, this scene also takes place in a kitchen, emphasizing the significance of queer domestic spaces for facilitating intergenerational dialogue. Over steaming cups of tea, Hoài asks their father how he mitigates refugee settler desire for permanent settlement on Indigenous land. He responds in Vietnamese: “Đây đâu phải đất nước của mình. Mà không phải đất nước mình, thì mình phải chịu thôi. (This is not our homeland. If this is not our homeland, we just have to deal with it.)”⁹⁸ Initially, this seems like an explanation for why Hoài should not join the political protests: Vietnamese refugees have no place in refuting domestic US policies, and the father is worried that he might lose his child as he lost his wife. However, the father continues: “Nhưng mà tội trắng nó cũng đâu phải dân gốc ở đây đâu. (But those white people, they’re not native either.)” In this way, he notes structural differences between white settlers and natives, offering an opening for critiquing settler imperialism. Later in the dialogue, Hoài asks tentatively: “How do you make peace with living on land that doesn’t belong to you?”⁹⁹ After a reflective pause, the father replies: “Mình làm người sống trong trời đất, nhưng mình không có sở hữu nó. (As humans living on earth, we only borrow the land and the sky.)”¹⁰⁰ Switching to English, he reiterates: “We do not own the land, or the sky. (Mình không sở hữu mặt đất, hay bầu trời.)” On one hand, his words reflect a particular Vietnamese Buddhist sensibility of transitory belonging. The “we” here seems universalist, reflecting more a spiritual philosophy than a specific critique of refugee resettlement across Indigenous lands and waters. However, when juxtaposed with the father’s above critique of white settlers’ non-native status, these words can also be read as an Indigenous-centered critique of private property ownership, which is sustained by heteronormative forms of settler inheritance.¹⁰¹ In other words, the father advocates for a queerer relationship to land/water, to *nước*, exemplifying what José Esteban Muñoz would call “disidentification” with refugee settler desire and Ly Thúy Nguyễn would term “queer dis/inheritance” of refugee trauma and the settler imperial violence that produced it.¹⁰² Hesitantly, Hoài continues: “How do you make peace with not having a homeland?”¹⁰³ Here, Hoài invokes the sense of “deep restlessness” noted by Lee in *Pioneer Girl*: the difficulty for Vietnamese refugees and their descendants to ever feel truly at home on Turtle Island or in Vietnam. However, they also invite a specifically *refugee* answer to the question of displacement onto Indigenous lands and waters. Bypassing the question of restlessness, the father replies: “Sống trên đời đó—mình

không như thế này thì mình như thế khác. Có ba đây. (Life happens—we adapt, we figure things out. I’m here.)”¹⁰⁴ Switching back to English, he concludes: “There will always be a place for you. (Ở đâu rồi cũng có chỗ cho con.)” Refugee settler desire for belonging, for a home to replace the lost homeland, is thus quenched not by an identification with white pioneer narratives of frontier expansion, but rather by an ethic of creating “a place” for one another: a queer familial refuge, in the face of forced displacement, that exceeds the nation-state’s arbitration of asylum and citizenship. Such a queer ethic informs the film’s refugee critique of the contemporary Muslim Ban and US-Mexico border wall.

But where do Turtle Island’s Indigenous subjects fit in this queer refugee critique of the United States’ xenophobic tightening of borders and erection of walls? Given its focus on interrogating refugee settler desire from a queer refugee perspective, *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* does not explicitly center Indigenous voices, though it features sovereignty posters to foreshadow the film’s final dialogue. This raises the question: What would an Indigenous welcome of refugees look like? What are the political terms of such a welcome? Here I turn to Nathan Phillips, elder of the Omaha Nation, Vietnam-era veteran, and Indigenous rights activist. In a video that went viral in January 2019, Phillips stood defiantly as he was taunted by teenagers wearing “Make America Great Again” hats outside the White House. In an interview recorded by Chamorro rights activist Kaya Taitano, Phillips reports: “I heard them saying, ‘Build that wall, build that wall.’ This is Indigenous lands, you know. We’re not supposed to have walls here. We never did. Before anyone else came here, we never had walls.”¹⁰⁵ In this statement, Phillips articulates an Indigenous embrace of refugees. Native sovereignty encompasses the sovereign right to welcome displaced peoples, on Native terms. Refusing the genocidal logics of “Indian Country” and the American frontier, Phillips instead articulates a geography of multiplicitous belonging—one that critiques settler state borders designed to exclude and instead advocates mutual care between Indigenous peoples and refugees, two populations displaced by settler imperialism. Whereas Phillips speaks on behalf of Turtle Island, later chapters in this book elaborate the contours of Indigenous hospitality in Guam and Israel-Palestine.

Like *Nước (Water/Homeland)* and *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)*, the cultural productions examined throughout this book are spectral and speculative: they gesture toward what is emergent and difficult to articulate, given the refugee settler condition. As noted above, there is not yet a sustained movement connecting Vietnamese American refugees and Native American sovereignty struggles. But *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* can spark important dialogue within the Vietnamese American community. Indeed, filmmaker Quynh Nguyen-Le wrote the final scene in *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* in hopes of one day being able to have a similar conversation with their own parents.¹⁰⁶ The film thus invites political action: the long-overdue project of building refugee-Indigenous solidarity across Turtle Island.

TURTLE ISLAND, GUAM, PALESTINE:
CHARTING AN ARCHIPELAGO OF
TRANS-INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

This chapter has mapped the settler imperial dimensions of the US War in Vietnam, situating Vietnamese refugee resettlement across Turtle Island within a longer genealogy of frontier expansion. Together with chapter 1, it provides crucial context for understanding *why* Vietnamese refugees resettled in Guam and Israel-Palestine—the focus of the remaining chapters—as well as the settler imperial implications of refugee resettlement on Indigenous lands and waters. In short, these two opening chapters have mapped an archipelago of US settler imperialism, which in turn shaped the post-1975 archipelago of Vietnamese refugee resettlement.

But what about a corresponding archipelago of trans-Indigenous resistance, as discussed at the end of chapter 1? To return to the two poems that opened this chapter: the seventh and final stanza of Craig Santos Perez’s “Interwoven” invites Indigenous subjects across Turtle Island *and* Oceania to “share our stories of hurt, / our stories of healing,” “interweaving our struggles” for “seven generations” to come. Projecting an archipelago of decolonial futurity, the poem concludes: “I hope the stories we share today / and in the future will carry us / towards sovereign horizons.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, in stanza five of her untitled poem marking resonances between First Nation and Palestinian women, Erica Violet Lee emphasizes the importance of “telling / retelling / telling again / the stories they tried to take from us / and trying to remember the ones they did” as a mode of survivance.¹⁰⁸

The following chapters unfurl as a series of stories: stories found in the archive, shared as oral histories, or fashioned into memoirs, blogs, poetry, and film. Such stories grapple with the refugee settler condition across Guam and Israel-Palestine. Part two details Vietnamese refugee migration to Guam and Israel-Palestine in the late 1970s, drawing from oral histories as well as archival research conducted at the Richard F. Taitano Micronesian Area Research Center, the Nieves M. Flores Memorial Library, and the Israel State Archives. Part three turns to cultural production to examine how this history of Vietnamese refugee resettlement has been re-storied, remembered, and retold. Solidarity between Indigenous peoples and Vietnamese refugees at these sites is still emergent; stories are therefore critical for imagining more ethical forms of refugee resettlement across Indigenous lands and waters.

Indeed, stories embody what Lisa Lowe has termed the “past conditional temporality” of “what could have been”: a “space of reckoning that allows us to revisit times of historical contingency and possibility to consider alternatives that may have been *unthought* in those times, and might otherwise remain so now, in order to imagine different futures for what lies ahead.”¹⁰⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* is a white settler narrative of frontier expansion, of restless

settler imperial domination across Osage lands. And yet the book's closing lines offer an unintentional opening for imagining otherwise. For *Little House on the Prairie* ends with a song about water, about *nước*, inadvertently calling to mind the voyage of Vietnamese boat refugees:

Row away, row o'er the waters so blue,
Like a feather we sail in our gum-tree canoe,
Row the boat lightly, love, over the sea;
Daily and nightly I'll wander with thee.¹¹⁰

Vietnamese American refugees often articulate refugee settler desire for national inclusion via interpolation in narratives of white pioneer settlement. But, conversely, read archipelagically, Vietnamese refugeehood may instead *unsettle* settlement, calling forth a politics of *nước*: of fluid attachments and liquid borders that drown out private property inheritances in favor of queerer and more relational forms of belonging. *Nước* may bring together currents of Indigenous resistance to challenge the settler imperial violence of the frontier.

