

Afterword

Floating Islands: Refugee Futurities and Decolonial Horizons

In their book-length manifesto on “seasteading,” Joe Quirk (a “seavangelist”) and Patri Freidman (grandson of economist Milton Friedman and founder of the Seasteading Institute) extoll the virtues of “floating nations on the sea,” arguing that ocean-based living configurations will restore the environment, enrich the poor, cure the sick, and liberate humanity from oppressive government structures.¹ Characterized as a “globally emerging Blue Revolution” and a “Silicon Valley of the Sea,” this seasteading initiative replaces land-based despotism with “fluidity of movement,” such that “political power would be radically decentralized and shared.”² Certain components of Quirk and Friedman’s seasteading manifesto resonate with *Archipelago of Resettlement*’s critiques of nation-state borders and its proposal for more archipelagic forms of belonging. Indeed, this book’s concerns are not isolated to the specific case studies of Vietnamese refugee settlers across Guam and Israel-Palestine but rather engage broader conversations about refugeehood, displacement, and settler colonialism. Whereas Quirk and Friedman propose a limitless future of libertarian freedom, however, this book takes seriously histories of war, displacement, and colonial occupation. Its imagination of a futurity routed through *nuớc* is shaped by refugee migration and Indigenous sovereignty.

Quirk and Friedman’s color-blind vision of a world of floating nations, in contrast, reproduces settler colonial fantasies of uncharted lands—or, in this case, seas—ripe for conquest. Seasteaders are positioned as pioneers charged with settling the “Blue Frontier”—a twenty-first-century manifestation of President Kennedy’s “New Frontier,” as discussed in chapter 2.³ Whereas Kennedy’s “New Frontier” elided the United States’ history of continental imperialism and charted a future of transpacific militarism, Quirk and Friedman’s “Blue Frontier” furthers

what Kanaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin calls a “logic of possession through whiteness”: white settler attempts to appropriate Pacific Islanders’ lands, seas, bodies, and ideas as their own.⁴ The Seasteading Institute’s proposal of modular units that can detach, travel, and reattach, offering seasteaders radical freedom to experiment with different modes of living and governance, elides preexisting Indigenous lifeworlds and long histories of expert seafaring. Furthermore, the group’s emphasis on untethered mobility raises questions: Who can choose to move, and who is forced to move? Who must fight for the right *not* to be moved?

The preceding chapters have queried the “national order of things” and unsettled the settler colonial state, proposing more fluid understandings of belonging through the Vietnamese concept of *nước*: water, country, homeland.⁵ They have challenged land-based understandings of collective organization in favor of more archipelagic imaginaries, rendering visible relations of US empire, militarism, and settler colonialism as well as resettlement, resistance, and decolonization. By way of conclusion, this afterword asks: What would a seasteading project that takes into account Indigenous and refugee histories, epistemologies, and futurities look like? How can a politics of refugeehood inform our decolonial horizons?⁶

According to Quirk and Friedman, humanity as we know it “is poised to plunge in 2050. We can drown or we can float.”⁷ It is in the year 2049, on the brink of such a civilizational collapse, that Vietnamese American author Linh Dinh sets his one-page futuristic story, “A Floating Community” (2004). In contrast to Quirk and Friedman’s utopic vision of seasteading, Dinh’s floating community, “discovered eighty miles off the coast of Guam,” is marked by forced displacement and precarious resettlement: “ninety-nine individuals” drift aimlessly on “eleven rotting boats, lashed together by ropes,” surviving on “flying fish and rain water.”⁸ The sea is described as both “holy and toxic,” the “final resting place of their ancestors” who drowned during the refugee exodus.⁹ According to Vinh Nguyen, Dinh’s sea is “reconfigured as home rather than transit; or, water becomes a home *in* transit, a drifting home moored in motion.”¹⁰ In other words, *nước* and transit are not in opposition to Vietnamese refugee resettlement but rather inherent in it, disrupting the “primacy of linear, property-centric, landlocked liberal individualism and settler-colonial governmentality.”¹¹

This floating community also retains a certain fungibility, suggesting archipelagic resonances across multiple histories of displacement. While the reference to Guam in the story’s first line calls to mind Vietnamese refugees processed during Operation New Life in 1975, the story’s invocation of “boat people” refers to later waves of Vietnamese refugees who braved uncertain waters to escape the aftermath of war. Dinh’s floating community, therefore, encompasses both the Vietnamese refugees processed in Guam (discussed in chapter 3) and the Vietnamese boat refugees that resettled in Israel-Palestine (discussed in chapter 4). Furthermore, although the narrator speculates that the ninety-nine subjects *might* be “the last of the Vietnamese boat people,” they are ultimately described as “individuals of

indeterminate nationality.”¹² This indeterminacy of nationality—versus ethnicity or race—suggests a critique of nation-state borders: nationhood becomes irrelevant in an apocalyptic future of mass displacement.

Indeed, if the current rate of war, militarism, imperialism, and settler colonialism continues, refugee futurity—understood as a future of mass refugeehood—would not be circumscribed to today’s refugees but would come to encompass humanity writ large. This is the future explored in *The Island* (2017), Tuan Andrew Nguyen’s forty-two-minute single-channel video installation featured at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Set in the wake of global nuclear destruction, around the same time as Dinh’s “A Floating Community,” *The Island* features Pulau Bidong, an island off the coast of Malaysia that served as the largest and longest-operating Southeast Asian refugee camp following the Vietnam War. Between 1978 and 1991, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees closed the camp and repatriated the remaining inhabitants, roughly 250,000 Southeast Asian refugees, including Nguyen and his family, had inhabited the island.¹³ According to refugee Han Hai Van, “Many people had an unfounded fear that the island would sink into the sea, and disappear completely with the weight of all the people. I felt as if the planet had stopped, and had forgotten about us.”¹⁴ *The Island* takes up these themes of arrested temporality and the politics of memory, cutting between archival footage of the Vietnamese refugee camp during the 1970s and ’80s, home videos of refugees returning to Pulau Bidong decades later, and scenes shot by Nguyen in the present to represent Pulau Bidong in the future.

Van’s comment about the planet stopping presages the future depicted in *The Island*. In the video installation, only two characters survive the world’s nuclear annihilation: a male Vietnamese refugee and a female United Nations scientist. Like *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) and *Hoài* (*Ongoing, Memory*) (discussed in chapter 2) and *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* (discussed in chapter 6), *The Island* engages refugee politics of translation: the refugee, played by Phạm Anh Khoa, speaks exclusively in Vietnamese accompanied by English subtitles, while the UN scientist, played by Donika Do Tinh, responds in English accompanied by Vietnamese subtitles. Their dialogue is interrupted twice by Khánh Ly’s famous song “Biển Nhớ” (The sea remembers), which would play regularly over the camp intercom during the 1970s through the 1990s whenever someone arrived or departed from the island. Having evaded forced repatriation, the unnamed refugee tends to Pulau Bidong alone, rebuilding a memorial commemorating the Vietnamese boat people and serving as a living archive for the human race: “The last wars made refugees out of the entire world. I am now the last on Earth. The one that carries the voices.”¹⁵ Vietnamese refugeehood prefigured humanity’s refugeehood; humanity’s memory is subsequently refracted through an ageless Vietnamese refugee’s memory. About a quarter of the way into the video installation, the UN scientist washes upon the shore of Pulau Bidong, having been set adrift when her home, “one of the last ships on the ocean” that had been working toward nuclear disarmament, was destroyed.

Echoing Dinh's "A Floating Community," she recalls: "I must have floated for over a month. No map. No record of how long."¹⁶

Although the refugee and the UN scientist communicate fluidly across languages, they disagree on how to move forward in the wake of global disaster. The latter becomes frustrated with the refugee's seeming refusal to care about life beyond the island's confines. She stresses that since they are the only two people left on earth, it is up to them to rebuild human civilization. The refugee responds, "So this is the last refugee camp?"¹⁷ This line recalls the specificity of Vietnamese refugeehood on Pulau Bidong, as well as suggests a finality to the condition of refugeehood writ large: no future camp will be necessary in the wake of humanity's destruction. But the scientist, more practical and global in her concerns, insists, "It is the only refuge now. But it won't be for long. We have to think about the future. We have to think of leaving the island."¹⁸ For the scientist, futurity exists beyond the island, which she interprets via the trope of insularity. The refugee reminds viewers, however, that specificity is not in opposition to universality; indeed, one can address global history, memory, and displacement only through specific case studies and situated contexts. Furthermore, no island is in isolation, but rather exists as a part of an archipelagic "sea of islands."¹⁹ *The Island* recalls another island of importance in Vietnamese refugee history, Guam, which served as the first major US processing center for Vietnamese refugees in 1975. Israel-Palestine, in turn, is also caught up in this story. Recall that Prime Minister Hussein Onn's 1979 declaration that he would tow away refugee boats seeking landfall in Malaysia was what spurred Prime Minister Menachem Begin to resettle the third wave of Vietnamese refugees in Israel-Palestine, including the parents of Vietnamese Israeli poet Vaan Nguyen. Indeed, *The Island* asserts that Vietnamese refugee history impresses not only upon the Vietnam War diaspora but also upon the world writ large.

Pulau Bidong is at once a cautionary tale against global refugeehood and the cradle of a new world order following global destruction. The refugee and the scientist argue about the organization of this new world:

Scientist: . . . We have to rebuild. We have to repopulate.

Refugee: You think we live in a fairy tale like the Mountain Fairy and the Dragon King?

Scientist: What I am talking about is not the origin story of the nation. It's the opposite. I am talking about the end of the world, and our responsibility to think of the future.

Refugee: A future for whom?

Scientist: For us. For humans.

Refugee: You've seen the brutality humans have caused.

Scientist: What do you know about anything? You've been on an island your entire life. Have you ever imagined an elsewhere?

Refugee: In that case, we are going to end the brutality right here. In the most gentle way possible.²⁰

According to the scientist, global nuclear destruction serves as an opening for reorganizing the world anew, not around nations or settler colonial states but around more ethical and contrapuntal forms of belonging as theorized in the preceding chapters. The refugee reminds viewers, however, that such visions for the future are not untethered from history, as Quirk and Friedman seem to suggest in their seasteading manifesto, but are rather rooted in place-based mythologies. Recall the story of the Mountain Fairy and the Dragon King that opened this book's introduction: the pair bore one hundred children who then split, half following their mother to the mountains and the other half following their father to the sea. The refugee observes that this is a "story of how the past predicted the future. Seems we've been caught between separation and exodus ever since."²¹ "Future" here refers both to the Vietnamese refugee exodus of the 1970s and '80s and to the postnuclear future of Dinh's and Nguyen's 2049. In other words, Vietnamese refugeehood is not incidental to global history but profoundly premonitory, warning of a postapocalyptic future if the current world order of forced displacement continues unabated. If humanity does get annihilated, according to the scientist, the solution is to rebuild and repopulate. In contrast, the refugee, acknowledging humanity's role in the world's environmental and nuclear destruction, proposes a more Indigenous cosmological approach in which humans give way to a different world order that acknowledges human entanglements with non-human collectives.

Such refugee futurity is characterized not by defeat but by a different articulation of refugee resilience. Although the video installation's final scene consists of a gender-ambiguous figure's back—either the refugee's or the scientist's—suddenly disappearing under the ocean's surface, this image of drowning is undercut by the refugee's voiceover, which insists, "We must keep afloat."²² This imperative is preceded by a provocation: "We exist only in the traces we leave behind. And those traces are echoed only in our memories of them. The relics, the mementos, the mythologies, the mysteries, the memorials, the monuments. All in an ocean of sinking memories. Which ones do we cling to in order to keep adrift?"²³

This book insists on the importance of mapping archipelagic histories of refugee resettlement in order to envision decolonial futures. Yet history must not be uncritically memorialized. We must sift through the traces of the past, to figure out which ones "we cling to in order to keep adrift." I suggest we let go of attachments to settler colonialism, refugee displacement, and nation-state exclusion and work instead toward an archipelago of decolonization. *Nước*, or what Vinh Nguyen calls "*oceanic spatiality*—the waterscape of the boat and of the sea"—can help to wash away the debris.²⁴

In *The Island*, Pulau Bidong is described as "an island that became a refuge. The second country. An in-between existence."²⁵ This in-betweenness marks a space of

transition, between one home and another, one world and another. But it is also, according to the refugee, “a space between life and death, land and sea, past and future.” Like *nước*, an island bridges land and water. Like the present, it connects past and future. Only by engaging refugee pasts, and working through the refugee settler condition in the present, can we begin to theorize refugee futurities and decolonial horizons.

Only then can we keep afloat.