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Cultivating "Indian Country": Settler Imperialism and Bich Minh Nguyen's *Pioneer Girl*

Marie Lo

ABSTRACT

This article examines *Pioneer Girl* as a critical juxtaposition of the contradictions of settler imperialism. Settler imperialism denotes how the logic and operations of settler colonialism rationalize modes of conquest that are not reducible to the acquisition of territory but are central to the consolidation of settler state security and power. The novel's use of *Little House on the Prairie* to explore the Lien family's exile and displacement as a result of US imperial violence in Southeast Asia juxtaposes the histories of settler colonialism with imperialism, illuminating how the narratives that justify western expansion are not strictly territorial imperatives. The western frontier as the crucial space in which one "becomes American" relies on subduing nature, converting the hostile recalcitrance ascribed to "Indian Country" into a "Garden of the World." In contrast, popular cultural references to Vietnam as "Indian Country" reiterate the demands of conversion and cultivation of docile liberal democratic subjects by destroying the Vietnamese landscape and robbing it of regenerative possibilities.

Attending to the different registers of cultivation central to the mythology of white homesteading in "Indian Country" illuminates settler imperialism's structuring logic and its environmental impact. Cultivating the environment is not simply a description of agrarian enterprise or a function of western expansion. Rather, cultivation is a mode by which the violence of settler imperialism is rationalized and naturalized and heteropatriarchal settler subjectivity is inculcated.

"A long time ago, when all the grandfathers and grandmothers of today were little boys and little girls or very small babies, or perhaps not even born, Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura and Baby Carrie left their little house in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. They drove away and left it lonely

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and empty in the clearing among the big trees, and they never saw that little house again.

They were going to the Indian Country."

LAURA INGALLS WILDER, *Little House on the Prairie* (1935)

"Johnson: Where I was operating I didn't hear anyone personally use that term ['turkey shoots']. We used the term 'Indian Country.'
Seiberling: What did 'Indian Country' refer to?
Johnson: I guess it means different things to different people. It is like there are savages out there, there are gooks out there."

Transcripts of congressional war crime hearings following the 1971 My Lai Massacre, qtd. in STEPHEN W. SILLIMAN, "The 'Old West' in the Middle East: U.S. Military Metaphors in Real and Imagined Indian Country" (2008)

The rise of urban homesteading in the United States has been propelled by the slow movement and rejection of globalization and the culture of mass production. This valorization of a DIY ethos that includes a return to the land and growing one's own food has been facilitated by numerous blogs, magazines, how-to books such as *Urban Homesteading*, and narratives that celebrate sustainable farm living in cityscapes such as *Farm City* by Novella Carpenter.[1] The reanimation of homesteading in US contemporary popular culture, however, seems disconnected from the history of land theft and broken treaties that underwrites white settler homesteading. The Homestead Act of 1862 accelerated the dispossession of American Indians of their territory and sovereignty (Dunbar-Ortiz 141). Popularly described as nomads, American Indians were presumed to have no understanding of cultivation, and their land was described as fallow, thus available to white homesteaders who could convert this land with their labor into property and a home. Indian territory or country was advertised to future immigrant settlers as the "Garden of the World" in a way that rendered Indigenous forms of cultivation invisible while touting the land's exceptional fertility.[2] In the contemporary celebration of cultivation, localism, and sustainability, the settler history that has defined who gets to migrate westward, cultivate, and claim a home is often erased.

This article explores homesteading and settler colonialism by way of a Vietnamese American text, *Pioneer Girl* by Bich Minh Nguyen, to tease out the particular formations of settler imperialism. The novel centers on Lee Lien's fascination with the US's favorite pioneering family from the *Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder and their allure as a "DIY guide to frontier living" (Nguyen 70). Refugeed by the American War in Vietnam,[3] Lee and her family eke out an itinerant existence working in the various Chinese buffets that dot the midwestern landscape before finally starting their own Vietnamese restaurant. While *Little House on the Prairie* is the literary template that makes *Pioneer Girl*'s plot possible (the title a direct reference to Ingalls's

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autobiography of the same name), it is the displacement and elimination of American Indians that make the homesteading narrative of *Little House on the Prairie* possible. As this essay's first epigraph, from the opening paragraph of *Little House*, indicates, leaving the familiar and venturing into the unknown, that is, "Indian Country," catalyze the origin story of homesteading, and the nostalgia around homesteading reflects its role in the mythology of a young nation, when "all the grandfathers and grandmothers" were little.

Though the roots of homesteading are tied to western expansion, the symbolic currency of "Indian Country" extends beyond the frontiers of the US West. As the second epigraph demonstrates, its emergence during the American War in Vietnam to describe hostile, alien territory inhabited by "savages" reanimates the Indian Wars during the Cold War. The massacre of unarmed Vietnamese civilians by US forces at My Lai in 1968 is reinscribed by Captain Johnson as a war of civilization against savagery, and the invocation of "Indian Country" here conflates the violence of settler colonialism with US imperial wars in Asia.[4] The designation of enemy territory during the American War in Vietnam as "Indian Country" is indicative of a broader history in which "Indian" serves, in the words of Jodi Byrd, as the "transit of empire" (xv). Whereas the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on imperial territorial rights, and the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries focused on the "logics of civil rights and late capitalism," the United States has consistently "used executive, legislative, and judicial means to make 'Indian' those people who stand in the way of U.S. military and economic desires" (xx).[5] The abstract space of Indian Country transits the US war in Asia as a part of the broader violence of US imperial formations; Indian Country—a wild, untamed, hostile space in need of the "civilizing" powers of democracy and capitalism—situates US military force in Southeast Asia within the ongoing developmental project of civilization against the forces of savagery. The slippages enacted by these equivalences of "savage" with "gook" reflect the fertile ground of signification that Indian Country provides for the cultivation of settler imperialism in the name of civilization. As synonyms, they blur the distinctions between settler colonialism and imperialism and index the conjoining of territorial wars discursively facilitated by racial formations that exceed geopolitical specificity. Just as "savage" justifies territorial expansion and settler colonialism in the name of civilization, the word "gook," as Jodi Kim argues, is the "genealogy of the United States' protracted triangulation of race, empire, and war" (3).[6] Such an invocation rationalizes imperial violence in the name of liberation, freedom, and democracy, constructing the racialized war in Vietnam as another frontier of Manifest Destiny.

I begin with these two epigraphs to bring into view the overlapping spaces of settler colonialism and imperialism in *Pioneer Girl* and to indicate a mode of relational critique that makes visible the genocidal imperatives of empire's

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civilizing mission. This mode of critique, which Yến Lê Espiritu calls "critical juxtapositions," brings together "seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire" (486). This seeming difference, Espiritu suggests, is a function of the ossification of groups, events, and places as "already constituted and discrete entities" (486), which forecloses an examination into the porous, flexible, and fluid spaces of overlap, abutment as well as interdependence. The linking of the American War in Vietnam to the Indian Wars reveals the continuity of the "genocidal injunction" that underwrites the civilizational project of conquest: "Kill the Indian, save the man."[7] The logic of necropower, in which killing is a form of saving, relies on a fungible "Indian Country" to justify civilization's imperial redemptive power. Achille Mbembé parallels colonies and frontiers as similarly inhabited by "savages." A space where guerilla warfare, extrajudicial killing, and violence beyond legal, juridical, and social norms are possible, Indian Country, in the language of Mbembé, can be understood as "the location par excellence where controls and guarantees of juridical order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization'" (77). Mimi Nguyen points to the use of Agent Orange and Napalm during the American War in Vietnam as an example of this kind of "terror as colonial warfare" that is not "subject to legal and institutional rule in the seeming wilderness that was Vietnam" (89). Under the cover of "wilderness" that simultaneously justified defoliation and civilian deaths as necessary military tactics, the norms of civilization are suspended in the drive to civilize the other. Put another way, the project of civilization is a wildly savage one.

My examination into the entanglements of Asian American cultural production, settler colonialism, and imperialism also invites an Asian American ecocritical engagement with settler colonialism and imperialism.[8] Though indelibly informed by critiques of Asian settler colonialism and the limits of an Asian American emphasis on racialized exclusion and domestic inclusion, scholarship on Asian-Indigenous relationality foregrounds the necessity of critically juxtaposing the histories and conditions of Asian migration with the dispossession of Indigenous peoples.[9] Iyko Day's work on romantic anticapitalism and the racialization of Asians as unnatural abstract labor points to how Asian racialization is defined against a settler landscape indigenized through the fetishization of concrete labor and the natural world. Romantic anticapitalism, Day argues, is not anticapitalistic at all, but an ideology that misunderstands capitalism as an opposition between the evils of abstraction and the value of the concrete, an opposition that ultimately indigenizes white settler labor as in sync with nature. While Day's examination draws primarily on the racialization of Asian immigrant labor to explore the indigenization of settler territory, the figure of the refugee, who does not follow the same trajectory

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of labor migration, also complicates the binaries between settler and native even as it indexes the operative force of US settler mythology. Foregrounding the multiple conditions of migration and the circuitry of empire that determine and facilitate these routes, Vietnamese refugee resettlement in the US, according to Quynh Nhu Le, is a process that "both undergird[s] U.S. settler imperatives and critically reveal[s] its operations and instabilities" ("Colonial Choreographies" 397). While Indigenous and Pacific Islander scholars have long articulated the links between resource extraction, militarization, dispossession, environmental devastation, and climate change, Asian American ecocriticism is less developed.[10] Robert Hiyashi suggests that the relative dearth of Asian American ecocriticism has been shaped by prevailing US understandings of environmentalism as essentially nature conservation. He argues that this not only occludes discussion of urban spaces in which Asian Americans primarily live, but it also diverts attention from the relationship between migration, settlement, and the environment, such as the impact of migration on the environment and how environmental forces and factors direct the flow of migration and settlement.

This article examines *Pioneer Girl* as exemplifying the critical juxtaposition of the contradictions of settler imperialism. I use the term "settler imperialism" to denote how the logic and operations of settler colonialism rationalize modes of conquest that are not reducible to the acquisition of territory but are central to the consolidation of settler state security and power.[11] The novel's emphasis on *Little House on the Prairie* to explore the Lien family's exile and displacement as a result of US imperial violence in Southeast Asia juxtaposes the histories of settler colonialism with imperialism, illuminating how the civilizational narratives that justify western expansion are not strictly territorial imperatives. The western frontier as the crucial imagined space of "becoming American" relies on subduing nature, converting the hostile recalcitrance ascribed to "Indian Country" into a "Garden of the World." In contrast, the persistent description of Vietnam as "Indian Country" reiterates the demand for conversion and cultivation of docile liberal democratic subjects through destroying the Vietnamese landscape and robbing it of regenerative possibilities.

Attending to the different registers of cultivation central to the mythology of white homesteading in Indian Country illuminates settler imperialism's structuring logic and its environmental impact. Cultivating the environment is not simply an agrarian description or a function of western expansion. Rather, cultivation is a mode by which the violence of settler imperialism is rationalized and naturalized and heteropatriarchal settler subjectivity is inculcated. In *Pioneer Girl*, the cultivation of "home" in homesteading is a gendered, transnational project of environmental violence that manifests in the domestic and quotidian details of home and property ownership, which Mark Rifkin argues is often the site of "settler common sense." Settler common sense, Rifkin notes, is a

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function of settler subjectivity in which white proprietary logics are perceived as given. The embodiment of setter subjectivity as "common sense" suggests that "the normalized legalities and geographies of settler policy—its displacement, containment, and erasure of Indigenous landedness and implementation and routinization of modes of nonnative dwelling—function largely as backdrop, as the unacknowledged condition of possibility for textual representations in which other issues occupy the foreground" (16). In the context of Vietnamese resettlement, "home" invokes the US imperial narratives of the refugee camp as paradoxically "both a seeming sanctuary and yet a militarized zone" (Le, "Colonial Choreographies" 404). The cultivation of home in *Pioneer Girl* is, therefore, is not a triumphant narrative of overcoming the landscape but, rather, a troubled one of "settling" and making do in the face of forced displacement and resettlement. Addressing Nguyen's novel as a text that reveals the logic of settler imperialism necessitates, however, first revisiting Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, from which it draws its structuring power.

Pioneering Discernment in the "Garden of the World"

The Ingallses' departure from the little house in the woods reflects the powerful nineteenth-century enticement to venture out west. Visions of lush, fertile landscapes that awaited prospective homesteaders, such as the ad in figure 1, encouraged white immigrants to see Indian Territory as a Garden of the World, that is, to recognize and "improve" it by cultivating land unappreciated or under-utilized by Indians.

This phrase, "Garden of the World," recalls a book of the same title, *The Garden of the World, or The Great West: Its History, Its Wealth, Its Natural Advantages, and Its Futures* by C.W. Dana, which was initially published in 1856, and later reprinted several times between 1857 and 1861.[12] Predating these ads by almost thirty years, *The Garden of the World* is a compendium that assesses the resources of western states and territories available for commodification and settlement. Its opening pages describe the West in the familiar terms of Manifest Destiny as the apex of white supremacy:

> With a soil more fertile than human agriculture has yet tilled; with a climate balmy and healthful, such as no other land in other zones can claim; with facilities for internal communication which outrival the world in extent and grandeur,—it does indeed present to the nations a land where the wildest dreamer on the future of our race may one day see actualized a destiny far outreaching in splendor his most gorgeous visions. (2)

Indigenous landedness and agriculture are rendered nonexistent in descriptions of soil that "human agriculture has [not] yet tilled," positing white cultivation of this land as the terrain for a civilizational dream never before

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Figure 1: Poster advertising Indian Territory as Garden of the World, circa 1880. Image courtesy of the National Archives.

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imagined. Encapsulating aspirations of white liberal freedom, this passage also reinscribes the racialization of labor and property codified in the 1823 Supreme Court Case, *Johnson v. M'Intosh*. This decision, which justified conquest as the basis for US property law, determined that Native Americans could not own land because, as nomadic wanderers, they had no concept of cultivation (35). Though the etymological relationship between cultivation and civilization, as Raymond Williams reminds us, has an intertwined history that long predates this case, the legal rationale for conquest frames Native Americans as wanderers, not farmers, and thus—in the discourse of the time—unable to cultivate "territory" into "gardens."[13] Cultivation, in this sense, references not only agricultural practices, but also the ability to discern the potential profitability of land and its resources, which *The Garden of the World* takes pains to itemize. This is the "most gorgeous visio[n]" of "our race," this civilized quality of discernment: the ability to differentiate and see land as capital, that is, units of property commodifiable and profitable as "gardens."

In *Little House on the Prairie*, whose original working title was, in fact, *Indian Country* (Romines 60), discernment as the interface between Indian Territory and Garden of the World reflects the inculcation of settler common sense as narrated through the perspective of young Laura. Laura's innocence and her struggle to understand the adults' divergent attitudes toward Indians are useful for considering how the novel plots discernment's development.[14] While Ma is fearful of Indians, Pa reminds them that their Indian visitor was "perfectly friendly" (229). Their neighbors, however, are explicit in their hostilities. During a visit, Mrs. Scott, after remarking on the Ingallses' "neat and comfortable and pretty" home, immediately proceeds to discuss the threats that Indians might pose: "Land knows, they'd never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that'll farm it. That's only common sense and justice" (211). An obvious example of settler common sense, Mrs. Scott's observations of the civilized domesticity of the Ingallses' home is both contrasted to Indians roaming like "wild animals" and rationalized by appeal to Lockean ideas about the natural laws of property that are also predicated on the feminized domestic space of home.[15] Mrs. Scott posits farming as the condition for property ownership and the sign of humanity, and her appreciation of the aesthetics of the Ingallses' home seems further indicative of her feminine refinement. And yet, Mrs. Scott is also presented as someone who seems to lack judgement. She glibly plows along, unaware of the children in the room, stating that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," and begins describing the Minnesota Massacre only to be tactfully silenced by Ma. "Whatever a massacre was," Laura observes, "it was something that grown-ups would not talk about when little girls were listening" (212).

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This pedagogical scene of discernment—that is, the cultivation of settler common sense, with its registers of feminine refinement, judgement, sense, taste, and discrimination—is variously parsed as contradictory and confusing from the perspective of young Laura. While Mrs. Scott seems to embody an extreme view of Indians, interactions with Ma and Pa also offer pedagogical opportunities to inculcate the links between civilization and cultivation. Pa, who is often described as the most sympathetic to Indians, tells Laura, "White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?" (237). When Laura protests, "But Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—" she is cut off by Pa. To address Laura's question would reveal the lie of conquest and the theft of Native land, undermining the lessons of homesteading in the project of civilization. Moreover, it would undermine Pa's paternal authority as someone uniquely able to interpret the actions of Indians and whose sympathy for them is meant to assuage Ma's fear. Toward the end of the novel, when the Indians are forced from their home, "a great peace settled on the prairie. And one morning the whole land was green. 'When did that grass grow?' Ma asked, in amazement. 'I thought the whole country was black, and now there's nothing but green grass as far as the eye can see'" (312). The answer to Ma's question harks back to an earlier point made by Pa. The black land that Ma speaks of is the result of a fire set by the Indians. Whereas Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards worried that the aim of the fire was to remove white settlers, Pa explains that the burning was to make the grass grow more quickly (283-84). This association between Indian departure and the lush fertile prairie implies a causal connection, suggesting that their departure paves the way for new beginnings and regeneration, typifying frontier mythology.[16] The contrast between black and green also reinforces representations of racial otherness as synonymous with darkness, decay, or barrenness in opposition to the abundance, growth, and awakening aligned with white settler civilization. What is left unacknowledged, however, is that the burning of the dense dead grass also enabled Pa to plow the land more easily, something he had been struggling with earlier (275). It is the Indians' burning of the land that gives way to the garden, enabling the Ingallses to one day "live like kings" (315). Native agricultural practices, while facilitating white homesteading, also represent that which cannot be fully acknowledged in the mythology of homesteading. The legal origin of property as a function of settler cultivation and civilization is founded on land theft, which the discourse of discernment erases.

Aesthetics of Displacement

In *Pioneer Girl*, the settler colonial logics of property, cultivation, and civilization are juxtaposed in relation to Vietnamese resettlement, indexing the

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ruptures and reiterations of settler common sense. Extending many of the critical insights on Asian-Indigenous relationality and settler "place-making" that Quynh Nhu Le articulates in her analysis of Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, however, *Pioneer Girl* offers a particular ecocritical lens through which to explore the possibilities of an ethical relationality. Though the novel does not deal with cultivation in the agrarian sense, cultivation as a means of Americanization is manifest in the language of homeownership. The novel invokes pioneer life to explore Lien's family's transient life of restaurant work, poverty, and the peripatetic conditions of resettlement. Lee's fascination with the *Little House on the Prairie* series is animated by a pin that Rose Wilder Lane, Wilder's daughter, may have left in Lee's grandfather Ong Hai's café in 1965 when Lane visited Vietnam for a commissioned article she was writing. It is noteworthy that Lee is a literary scholar whose search for the mysterious origins of this pin serves multiple functions. It foregrounds the pedagogy of discernment, serves as the catalyst for Lee's desire to be a part of the foundational narratives of Americanization, and bridges the lacunae in her family history.[17] Indeed, the novel is laced with gaps and uncertainty: the absent details of Lee's father's drowning, the wall of stubborn silence that divides Lee from her mother, the undefined relationship between Lee and boy/friend Alex and later Gregory, the possibility that Rose might have given a child up for adoption, and her uncertain professional future as a newly-minted literature PhD.

The pin literally and metaphorically juxtaposes the history of US settler colonialism with the history of US imperialism in Southeast Asia. The pin is in the shape of a small house bordered by tall grass and is reminiscent of the one that Almanzo gives Laura in *These Happy Golden Years*. It is one of the few keepsakes Lee's mother has saved from their life back in Vietnam, and it connects Lee's family's past with their present struggles to find a place to settle in the US: "So much immigrant desire in this country could be summed up, quite literally, in gold: as shining as the pin Rose had left behind" (46-47). As a symbol of immigrant desire, it also enables her to see her life through its aspirational possibilities. As Lee explains, the Ingallses' "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" (159). While such a comparison speaks to the national mythology of pioneering and immigration, it is premised on white settler common sense. What differentiates the Lien family from the Ingallses is that the Ingallses had "a baseline white entitlement: the Indian lands, should of course, be given to white settlers" and they "roamed as if any parcel of land out West might be theirs for the taking" (Nguyen 71). In contrast, Lee has to contend with questions such as "what right [she] had to be in this country" (55). Many Vietnamese Americans had sided with and fought alongside US soldiers during the War. Lee observes,

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"I started realizing that not everyone knew the basic history of the war, that there were those who viewed all of Vietnam as the enemy" (56).

Lee's comparison between immigrant and pioneer reveals the limits of the racialized mythology of white settler homesteading. The settler nation is constituted through the ongoing process of dispossession, one that links the Vietnamese diaspora to the removal of American Indians through the persistent construction of both as savage enemies of the state. This construction, in turn, erases the genocidal violence of white settlement, the policies of Indian removal and land expropriation, the devastation of Vietnam and its people, and the refugee crisis as a result of US military operations. In the context of these erasures, Lee's description of the Ingallses' "roaming" ironically contrasts with the kind of "roaming" Mrs. Scott associates with savagery. While settler "roaming" is rewritten in the language of possessive individualism and settler common sense, in which land ownership is not only the predominant form of relationship to land but also a given, Lee's citation of this term reminds us of the conceptual slippages of savagery that underpin settler ideology. This invocation of settler roaming, in contrast to the dominant discourse around Indian roaming, suggests that it is not the mere fact of roaming or being nomadic that is the sign of savagery. Rather, it is the primacy given to houses as sites of heteropatriarchal settler sociality in the discourse of homesteading: domiciles in which white families, headed by white fathers (Pa), dwell. Embodied in the very switch of the novel's working title from *Indian Country* to one organized around a "little house" on the prairie, the house as home functions as the teleological object of settler national narratives that defines civilization as upheld by heteronormative nuclear families.

The intertwining of a house and homeownership not only serves as a sign of civilization, but to be "housed" is often synonymous with inclusion and recognition within settler national narratives. This convergence of intelligibility, recognition, and belonging is crystalized by the novel's exploration of its antithesis—historical effacement or exclusion as homelessness and dispossession. As she struggles to explain to Ong Hai and her mother about the pull of the *Little House on the Prairie* series, she thinks,

> I wanted to tell them that my own concept of American history had been unknowingly shaped by reading those books, and that they had rooted in me 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 the pictures and edged out of history. (248)

This concept of "American history" is told from the perspective of white settlers and is organized around the logic of racialized inclusion and exclusion. The Chinese workers, many of whom were men and lived together in boarding

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houses, were "edged out of history" because their experiences as pioneers in the US West did not fit the paradigms of white homesteading and the norms of heteropatriarchal sociality that *Little House on the Prairie* promotes. Lee's own family is absent of a father figure, and Ong Hai seems to defer to his daughter, Lee's mother, more than Lee would like. Lee's acknowledgement of how the logic of settler colonialism shapes her relation to belonging also reveals the limits of settler history and the politics of recognition and inclusion. The marginalization of Chinese workers cannot be rectified by expanding settler history's field of vision. Such a form of inclusion preserves the rhetorics of homeownership and the nuclear family that have been central to US national mythology and the symbol of the American Dream.

The novel indexes how expressions of the desire for inclusion are themselves a function of the colonial politics of recognition that, as Glen Coulthard argues, entices identification with asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition that consolidate recognition as a mode of state power. In *Pioneer Girl*, the desires for recognition and inclusion in the history of the United States are intertwined with the normalization of ownership as both the condition and sign of belonging. "Nothing could ever be ours," as Lee's brother Sam pointed out about their status as renters, "until we owned" (111). Here homeownership is the condition for other kinds of claims. The proprietary logic of ownership, whether it be a home or a part of US history, recurs throughout the text. Lee's search is animated by the hope of "a claim on America's favorite pioneer family" (81). During her research in the Rose Wilder Lane archives at the Herbert Hoover Library, she pockets a blurred photograph taken in Vietnam of a man who she thinks could be Ong Hai. Later, she takes a copy of Rose's book *Free Land* from the Laura Ingalls Wilder museum. At the end of the novel and no closer to solving this mystery, as she packs her only possessions in a car that will take her to her visiting professor position, she reflects, "Who gets to say the secrets? Who gets to keep the stolen goods?" (293). Lee's "theft" of these archival documents of US history reveals the role these sites of knowledge production—the archive and the museum—play in constituting the teleology of recognition and inclusion. The parallel construction of the two sentences equates secrets with stolen goods and lays bare how the construction of official history is inseparable from the colonial history of theft and appropriation. The naturalized claims of settler common sense are, in fact, founded on stolen lands.

Through the course of her search, Lee highlights the excisions and failures that are downplayed in the mythologization of homesteading; *Little House on the Prairie*, Lee notes, "is really about failure, Manifest Destiny and the tension between whites and the Osage Indians whose lands are being threatened" (126). Rather than a triumphant narrative of pioneering, Lee points out that Pa made many mistakes and that the Ingallses were eventually forced to leave by

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federal troops because they squatted too far into Indian territory. The currency of homesteading narratives like *Little House on the Prairie*, as Lee suggests, is premised on the effacement of Indigenous agriculture and the elision of settler failures. But in pointing out these failures, *Pioneer Girl* does not fill in the gaps or remedy the exclusions so much as it gives an account of how the pedagogical force of cultivation and its proprietary logics constitute settler subjectivity.

Settler subjectivity, according to Alan Lawson, is called into being through narrative (1216). That Lee is a scholar of literature is a useful heuristic to comment on the pedagogical force and interpellative power of narrative in the formation of settler subjectivity and its gendered dimensions. Her personal research into the *Little House on the Prairie* series contrasts with her professional research into the work of Edith Wharton, which Lee characterizes as the opposite of the pioneering family. Her scholarly immersion in both worlds leads Alex to ask upon meeting after a long absence: "So who are you with right now, Edith Wharton or Laura Ingalls Wilder?" (61). While the choice between Wilder and Wharton appears to be a lopsided one given the extent to which Wilder saturates the novel, Wharton's stories of wealth, culture, and the rigidity of social mores of elite East Coast families also reiterate ideas of home and domesticity central to settler common sense and the proprietary logics of white ownership. Though Wilder and Wharton are presented as antithetical to each other, they occupy different and shifting points of a developmental narrative of settler subjectivity. In fact, it is Lee's younger self's fascination with Wharton's writing, what she describes as "wealth porn," that later leads her to write a dissertation on Wharton (252). Her research on *Little House on the Prairie* is preceded by the childhood impact of Wharton's work and the skills she later honed as a Wharton scholar. Subsequently, as a result of her search for Wilder and Lane, she is eventually able to overcome her writer's block and return to working on Wharton.

Even though studying Wharton is a "slog" (103), Lee's dissertation title, "Reifying the Aesthetics of Place," reveals the imbrication of representational forms with homeownership, belonging, and resettlement. Lee's own interests in feminine domestic spaces and aesthetics recall the kind of discernment that Mrs. Scott seemed to cultivate. Here cultivation is not just tied to the labor that is needed to lay claim to land and convert it to property; it is also reworked as a function of leisure and capital. Thus, while Lee's dissertation focuses on the aesthetic reification of place, her own life might be better described by the aesthetic reification of displacement. When Lee visits her former college friend Amy, who has chosen a corporate rather than academic career path, she marvels at Amy's home:

> Whenever I admired people's houses I got fixated on the detail, the cost of lampshades and drawer pulls and crown molding. How much

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consideration had been given to the placement of picture frames, of candlesticks on a fireplace mantel? How much could a person, if unhampered by time and money constraints, devote to such refinement, to the pleasure of pure decoration? (166)

Lee's attention to decoration and the nonessential elements of homemaking such as lampshades, picture frames, and candlesticks reflects her acute sense of how notions of refinement are tied to the accumulation of wealth and property. But, as Lee's observations suggest, such forms of "decoration" are manifestations of surplus capital "unhampered by time and money." In this scene, Lee offers a reading that reveals how an aesthetics of domestic environments also reifies *displacement*, a reading that is encoded within the settler discourse of cultivated taste and discernment that racializes forms of labor. Rather than simply presented as extraneous or superficial, her attention to the elements that make a home "cozy," to borrow Mrs. Scott's words, reflects the extent to which these decorative details are signs of Americanization, which as renters they could never access.

The logic of ownership naturalizes property as the condition for historical inclusion and recognition. The condition of property ownership as the requisite for participation in white liberal democracy is played out in the dispossession of American Indians, the reduction of Black people to property, and the alien land laws that further prevented Asians from settling.[18] Lee's acute sense of her family as a nonheteronormative unit of "renters" reflects not only the contingency and dislocation of their multiple resettlements, but also their status as refugees for whom the nostalgia of return is foreclosed. Their settling is not equivalent to the kind of settlement chronicled in the mythology of pioneering narratives. Rather, this form of settling is about "making do" in the face of precarity and loss.

Democratizing Missions, Expendable Environments

Critical juxtaposition brings together seemingly divergent or unrelated histories of race, empire, and capital; the mysterious pin functions in the novel to do the same. Lee's sense of homelessness, a result of the reification of the aesthetics of displacement, is also reflected in the mysterious origins of the pin and the histories of settler colonialism and imperialism that it encompasses. As Jodi Kim astutely observes, the wars in Asia were only metaphorically "cold" when considered from the distant perspectives of Euro-Americans. For Asians bearing the brunt of the violence in their home countries, they were decidedly "hot" and "bloody" ones (19). The displacement of the "Hot War" by the "Cold War" reflects a continuity in which the "civilizing" mission of the nineteenth-century Indian Wars is reanimated as a "democratizing" mission in Vietnam. What underpins this displacement and continuity is the persistent

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figuration of Indian Country as both the ground of possibility for capitalism, the free market, and liberal democracy *and* the place that threatens their existence. It is this anxiety that is reflected in the article that Lane, a staunch anti-communist, writes, and that, referenced in the novel's prologue, potentially links Lee's family to the Ingallses.

Lane's travel article, "August in Vietnam," published in *Women's Day Magazine* in 1965, was commissioned by the Department of Defense, which asked Lane to write about Vietnam from a "woman's perspective" (Lauters 145). Lee says little about the article except to note that it was "a little too *Miss Saigon* for comfort" despite its "genial view of the Vietnamese people" (Nguyen 44). For Lee, its primary draw was the possibility that Ong Hai's café or her family might be found in its pages, which, to her disappointment, they were not. Instead, the article opens with a description of Vietnam comparable to the exceptionalist terms attributed to a Garden of the World:

> No land on earth is more beautiful than Vietnam. The central mountain peaks climb blue beyond blue above dense forests and cleared slopes where hamlets cluster in villages and streams run swiftly. Below them the South China Sea thrusts deep harbors between jungle-covered mountains reflected, dark green, in the clear water. (qtd. in Lauters 146)

Whereas the Garden of the World in the US West is the result of its conversion from Indian Country, in Vietnam the process is the inverse. The paradisal and bucolic description of Vietnam, evocative of a nostalgia for a simpler time, is swiftly undercut by a discussion of Ho Chi Minh and a description of the barbaric violence under his leadership aimed at making people "docile" (148). Lane's use of the word "docile" is contrasted with what she views as the rhetorical obfuscation of the communists' self-proclaimed "War of Liberation," which she puts in quotation marks. She warns her readers to take the Communists seriously, as they are willing to "torture and kill" as well as "suffer and die for it" (149). A "tactic tested and proved," this "'War of Liberation' is stealthy, it is hidden subversion and secret invasion," aimed at creating pliant citizens rather than liberating them (148–49). The language of secrecy, duplicity, and impending threat is interwoven with sensationalist examples of explicit violence, such as chopping off the fingers of a six-year-old girl and the murders of women and children by the Viet Cong.

The contrast between the verdant landscape and the barbarism masked by an emancipatory discourse gives urgency to the need for a mode of detection that will enable US civilians and soldiers in Saigon to differentiate among the "two million persons, any of whom could be Viet Cong dynamiters or assassins" (151). Detection is the analogue of discernment in the context of the Cold War. In the United States, Indian inability to discern land as a source of profit and garden-making is the rationale for conquest and dispossession. In the context of Vietnam, the ability to detect the enemy and see beyond the

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landscape and the ruse of "liberation" is presented as key to military success.[19] The language of masking and unmasking that permeates Lane's piece reflects the discursive framing that justified the destruction of Vietnam's jungles as a key military tactic. The Vietnamese military, according to Neil Oatsvall, "found trees to be useful allies," while the US military saw them as "weeds that should be destroyed for optimal wartime functionality" (432). To facilitate detection of the "enemy" under the cover of the Vietnamese jungles, Operation Ranch Hand dropped over seventy-seven million gallons of chemical defoliant over five million acres. The expendability of Vietnam's verdant landscape in this war to unmask the "war of liberation" entails casting all of Vietnam as a weed in the expansive metaphorical gardens of US civilization and democracy (Zeirler 2).

The cultivation of one verdant landscape and the destruction of another both justify and erase settler imperial violence in service of the securitization of the US settler state. Securitization, in this instance, not only refers to military operations and the discourse of security. Its financial registers also highlight the convergence of economic and military structures, a process that, according to Aimee Bahng, "actualizes the fantasies of nation, homeland, and threat" (52). The ability to cultivate discernment and the ability to discern communist enemies are both settler imperial fantasies that draw on the symbolic and material currency of "land" to consolidate white property ownership as the condition of US national identity and the promise of the free market. Thus, despite the fundamental differences between US settlement and US imperialism, what appear as divergent responses of cultivation and destruction are parallel projects of settler imperialism, operationalized and securitized through Indigenous dispossession. Not only are American Indian relationships to the land erased and rendered expendable in the violent cultivation of imperial forms of agriculture and property, but so are the Vietnamese; their relationship to their land is deemed an obstacle to the economic imperatives of US capitalism, which, in turn, justifies military intervention through environmental destruction. In this context, the conversion of Indian Country into the Gardens of the World might be understood not merely as a territorial project of westward expansion. Rather, any place designated "Indian Country" becomes available to the economic and military predations of US imperial modes of "gardening" the world.

The environmental destruction of Vietnam and the impact of chemical defoliants on civilians and soldiers exposed to their harmful effects are still felt today. However, *Pioneer Girl* makes no mention of this aspect of the war. Indeed, the novel upends the expectation that Vietnamese diasporic writing focuses on the American War in Vietnam or on the nostalgia of Vietnam prior to resettlement by referring little to the war at all. In this sense, we might read *Pioneer Girl* as a response to the "narrative scarcity" of Vietnamese American representation that Viet Thanh Nguyen identifies as a feature of these reductive expectations. A scholar of literature, Lee's vision of belonging is so overdetermined

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by the narrative worlds of Ingalls and Wharton that she has become oblivious to other powerful storytellers in her life. Her focus on canonical US writers blinds her to the stories that Ong Hai tells. When Ong Hai discusses their luck in making it to the US after the war, Lee notes, "If I attempted to point out all the bad luck—the fact of war, loss, displacement—he waved these away. *That's not good or bad luck; that's life*" (22–23). While Lee is frustrated with what she sees as Ong Hai's refusal to stand up to her mother or to the forces that have exiled them from Vietnam, at the end of the novel she realizes that Ong Hai's resistance to an interpretive framework of binaries—that is, "good" or "bad" luck—is also a simultaneous emphasis on the importance of controlling the story. "The person who controls the story," Ong Hai tells Lee, "is the person in control" (265). In his version, Lee's father, who drowned when she was young, was more heroic and larger than life than he actually was. As Lee notes, "In Ong Hai's version of events, the wars in Vietnam needn't be dwelled upon. In his version, his old Café 88 had been a welcome haven for neighbors and tourists alike, even a mysterious American woman had taken a liking to him, who had left him with a part of her history" (285).

As the novel concludes, Lee is no closer to discovering the origins of the pin than she was in the beginning, though the anxieties about her professional future are temporarily stayed by a visiting assistant professor position. As she gets ready to leave home for her new job, she reflects on how her study of literature is mapped onto the landscape:

> So far I have spent almost half 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 of the 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. (292)

The settler perspective of Indian Country constructs the Cold War as an extension of the frontier mythology in which imperial violence is masked behind the valorization of white settler self-determination and empowerment. The doubling of the statement, "You settle," suggests that for those displaced and exiled by these grand narratives, the ethos of self-sufficiency and the pioneering spirit are reworked to signify survival, in which "settling" is just not "settling down" but also "making do."

"Making do" as a condition of the Lien family's resettlement is not simply a concession or the denial of their agency, but an example of what Quynh Nhu Le calls "colonial choreographies," the processes of refugee resettlement that both sustain and rupture "the spaces and logics of settler placemaking."

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The performative dimension of choreography "highlights resettlement as a key performance of settler placemaking" (403). In keying on Le's account of the temporal, spatial, and performative dimensions of choreography, "making do" is also improvisation, reimagining a relationship with the land that is not reducible to the forms of white property. Just as elsewhere Lee undercuts the assumptions of nomadic Indian life by highlighting how settler "roaming" is foundational to settler common sense, in the above passage, "land" is no longer just a commodified object of white property ownership but also the result of movement across space and time: "You get to the place where you land." By reminding us that "land" is also a verb and not just a noun, Lee foregrounds the twinned processes of "landing" and "land-making" in which we might reimagine refugee "landing" as both a function of settler imperial exile and a relational and improvisational act of survival in the face of that displacement. Land, in settler common sense, is stripped of its Indigenous inhabitants and presumed available to roaming white settlers. Or it is expendable, as in the case of Vietnam, in order to preserve the racial capitalist order of US settler imperialism. Lee's use of "land" as a verb denaturalizes its object status by reimaging the possibilities of home and belonging without the predicates of property ownership even as it points to the forces that precipitate the need to land. In linking the processes of settler colonialism and the dispossession of American Indians with the "landing" of Vietnamese refugees in the US, to "settle" or "make do" imagines a mode of refugee survival and Asian-Indigenous relationality beyond the logics of settler property ownership and "little houses on the prairies."

Reading out of Context

The assumption that Asian American narratives of imperialism are disconnected from the operations of settler colonialism is itself a function of the anti-relational foundations of settler imperial capitalism and the seemingly discrete historical formations that critical juxtaposition contests. In *Pioneer Girl*, to "settle" in the US and lay down roots is freighted with the environmental destruction of Vietnam and the violent removal, dispossession, and resettlement of "Indians" in the United States and Vietnam. During a one-year fellowship in Philadelphia, Lee resumes research on Wharton. She spends her days in the library reading room: "Some days I wrote. Some days I read about the Homesteading Acts of the late 1800s" (284). A fleeting reference to acts that accelerated the dispossession of American Indians, the linked historical formations encompassing the eastern cultural elites and the mythology of homesteading are reflected in the juxtaposed parallel sentence constructions of "Some days I wrote. Some days I read." Although cultivation in the context of the Cold War is not just a response to savage outposts but also a sign

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of civilization intimately tied with capitalism and the free market, this brief moment offers a different pedagogical scene of cultivation and discernment. Lee's juxtaposition of Wharton and the impact of white settler homesteading gestures at a critical refugee subjectivity that emerges from reading out of context.

What the novel reveals is the elision of the histories and contexts necessary to preserve the mythology of the frontier. As a strategy for reading critical juxtapositions, we may look to reading texts out of "context," that is, contexts that seem unrelated to what is presented as given and naturalized as an index of settler common sense. This pedagogical scene of reading out of context suggests the formation of a critical refugee mode of discernment, one that moves beyond the developmental trajectory of a "pioneer girl," where the cultivation of gendered domestic spaces is synonymous with civilization. Lee's reading out of context inculcates a mode of discernment that identifies the ravages of cultivation itself. What becomes discernable is how cultivation is the weapon by which the settler imperial civilization advances itself. The Garden of the World is only available to those who reap the benefits of conquest and is only imaginable through the construction of its anthesis, Indian Country. Hidden behind the promise of cultivation are the very instruments of savage-making. Indian territory is rhetorically figured as both desirable for homesteading and expendable to preserve the "democratizing" forces of western liberalism. Reading out of context reveals the limits of the US's foundational myths and the progressive linearity that underwrites civilizational narratives about savagery and race as well as juxtaposing the critical possibilities of settler colonial critique and critical refugee studies.

Notes

1. The Homestead Bloggers Network numbers over 300 members. Popular blogs include *The Urban Homestead*, Jill Winger's *The Prairie Homestead*, and *The Elliott Homestead*. In addition to older magazines such as *Grit* and *Mother Earth News*, which have become more mainstream, new magazines such as *The New Pioneer*, *Hobby Farm,* and *The Pioneer Woman* point to the growing popularity of this DIY, homesteading spirit.

2. See Figure 1 and Dana.

3. I use Christina Schwenkel and Viet Than Nguyen's phrase "American War in Vietnam" as opposed to "Vietnam War" to highlight the unequal representations of the war and to foreground the role of the US in this war. See also Dao-Shah and Pelaud.

4. Jodi Kim notes how embedded the language of the frontier was in the operations of the American War in Vietnam. Military operations were called "Daniel Boone," "Cochise," and "Crazy Horse," and going on patrol was described as "playing cowboys and Indians" (201).

5. Keith Feldman also points to the use of settler colonial tropes in the War on Terror and the construction of the Middle East as another site of the western frontier.

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6. Kim points to Paul Kramer's analysis of the emergence of this term among US soldiers fighting the Philippine insurrection against US imperialism.

7. This phrase, which became representative of the assimilating project of Indian boarding schools, was first popularized by Richard H. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian School, in a speech at the 1892 National Conference of Charites (Pratt 46).

8. In this way, this paper might be viewed as a response to the call put forth by the editors of a special issue of *American Quarterly*, "Alternative Contact: Indigeneity, Globalism and American Studies," in whose introduction Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith foreground Indigenous emphases on environmental critique and sustainability as a central site of comparative American Studies engagement.

9. See Fujikane and Okamura, Trask, and Saranillio. For scholarship on Asian-Indigenous relationality, see Byrd, Day, and Le.

10. Exceptions include the work of Julie Sze, Brett Esaki, and Chiyo Crawford.

11. Here I draw on and modify the term "settler empire" as articulated by Joshua Simon, who notes that the logics and operations of setter colonialism are not antithetical but rather overlap and at times are difficult to disentangle.

12. Later editions were published under the title *The Great West; or, The Garden of the World*.

13. See Banner.

14. See also Heldrich. For an analysis of the representation of Indians in *Little House on the Prairie*, see Smulder.

15. There is a substantial body of scholarship on the gendered construction of the frontier in *Little House on the Prairie*, including Anne Romines's *Constructing the Little House* and Louise Mowder's "Domestication of Desire: Gender, Language, and Landscape in the Little House Books." Though Romines views the Ingalls women as representing a "colonial outpost of Anglo-American propriety on the Great Plains" (58), one could argue that this gendered representation extends to all the women in the novel.

16. See Slotkin.

17. See Cordell and Martín-Lucas.

18. Alien land laws prevented immigrants, or "aliens," who were ineligible for citizenship from owning or leasing land. The laws were targeted at Asian immigrants because Asian immigrants could not become naturalized US citizens. California's 1913 Alien Land Law became the model for many other states, including Arizona, Washington, Louisiana, and Oregon.

19. See Zierler.

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