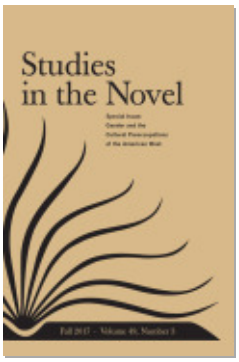
Between Refugee and 'Normalized' Citizen: National Narratives of Exclusion in the Novels of Bich Minh Nguyen



Sigrid Anderson Cordell

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BETWEEN REFUGEE AND 'NORMALIZED' CITIZEN: NATIONAL NARRATIVES OF EXCLUSION IN THE NOVELS OF BICH MINH NGUYEN

SIGRID ANDERSON CORDELL

Introduction

> The first and best way to secure America's homeland is to attack the enemy where he hides and plans, and we're doing just that.
> – George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Proposed Department of Homeland Security, June 6, 2002"

> In the last 14 months, every level of our government has taken steps to be better prepared against a terrorist attack. We understand the nature of the enemy. We understand they hate us because of what we love. We're doing everything we can to enhance security at our airports and power plants and border crossings.
> – George W. Bush, "President Bush Signs Homeland Security Act, Nov. 2002"

> Your name was brought to our attention because, among other things, you came to Michigan on a visa from a country where there are groups that support, advocate, or finance international terrorism. **We have no reason to believe that you are, in any way, associated with terrorist activities.** Nevertheless, you may know something that may be helpful in our efforts. In fact, it is quite possible that you have information that may seem irrelevant to you but which may help us to piece together this puzzle.
> – US Dept. of Justice, "Letter from the U.S. Department of Justice concerning September 11 terrorist activities, November 26, 2001" (emphasis in original)

In the months following September 11, 2001, the Bush administration undertook a series of steps aimed at preventing future attacks, including tightening immigration restrictions and targeting Arab American communities by asking some eight thousand "mostly Middle Eastern" men between the ages

of eighteen and thirty-three to submit to "voluntary" interviews by the Justice Department about what they might know about terrorist activities (Report on Hate Crimes 36). Despite rhetoric about not targeting Muslims, and letters like the one quoted above ostensibly emphasizing that those targeted for interviews are not under suspicion, the government's actions clearly singled out Muslim communities and created an atmosphere of fear. Language invoking the threat from an "enemy" who "hate[s]" Americans because of "what we love" is everywhere in Bush's speeches and policies from this period and was broadly seen as reinforcing stereotypes about dangerous outsiders and contributing to a rise in hate crimes in the US.

For Dinh Luong, the protagonist's father in Bich Minh Nguyen's novel *Short Girls* (2009), Bush's rhetoric and actions targeting enemies of the state to be denied entry at the border or rooted out in the homeland is completely disconnected from his own decision to seek citizenship after twenty-eight years in the US. As he sees it, the path from Vietnamese refugee to citizen should be a smooth one that recognizes his potential as an entrepreneur and his decision to leave behind his "refugee status" (3). He sees his path to citizenship entirely within the context of the Vietnamese community, divorced from broader political events, and he celebrates by throwing a party "in the old style, the way all of the Vietnamese families in their town used to gather in the late seventies and eighties....a reunion, a remembrance of their collective flight from Vietnam and settlement in America" (3). For Mr. Luong, his citizenship status, and the bureaucratic headaches that had to be overcome in order to make it happen, reflects his relationship to the US as a Vietnamese refugee and to his neighbors in the Vietnamese immigrant community, many of whom had long ago taken the steps to become a citizen. Taking the citizenship oath is a re-affirmation of his relationship to that community, and that is why he wants to celebrate by bringing together the families who shared those first years after fleeing Vietnam. Nguyen, however, takes care to draw clear connections between the broader political rhetoric over combating terrorism by tightening immigration laws and the Vietnamese immigrant community in Michigan. Acts of exclusion, Nguyen's novel stresses, ultimately target all immigrant groups, underscoring the ongoing question of who gets to be an American. In *Short Girls*, Vietnamese immigration to the Midwest is both particularized in terms of a specific community and generalized in terms of widespread fears over the precarity of citizenship and legal residency documents in the context of debates about fighting terrorism.

Nguyen's novelistic engagement with heightened anxieties among immigrants in post-9/11 Michigan has gotten less scholarly attention than her most recent novel, *Pioneer Girl* (2014), which relates the story of Lee Lien, whose family fled Vietnam in 1975 after the fall of Saigon, as she searches for her family's connection to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books. *Pioneer Girl*'s narrative of searching for a space in the national myths

of frontier expansion and independence takes on larger meaning, however, when read alongside *Short Girls*. Reading these works together makes visible the ways in which Nguyen's work insists on making connections between the Asian American search for identity in the Midwest, national myths romanticizing a white pioneer past, and national political debates over inclusion and exclusion.

Reading these novels together demands an intersectional approach that is attentive both to the gendered national myths of the US West and to the politics of immigration, Vietnamese resettlement, and Asian American isolation in the Midwest. Nguyen's novels call for the attentiveness to heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity outlined by Lisa Lowe through which "'horizontal' affiliations with other groups can be imagined and realized" (71). To limit our reading of Nguyen's work to its exploration of ethnic identity in relation to the pioneer girl mythology of Wilder's books without a consideration of broader political and gendered concerns would be tantamount to other kinds of essentialist cultural critiques that, as Lowe puts it, are "at odds with the formation of important political alliances and affiliations with other groups across racial and ethnic, gender, sexuality, and class lines" (72).

Nguyen's novels *Short Girls* and *Pioneer Girl* foreground the connections between the Vietnamese American community in the Midwest and political narratives over who belongs and who should be excluded. Vietnamese resettlement in the US occurred in the context of US desire to forget its failure in Vietnam, along with the accompanying hostility toward refugees themselves as an embodiment of that failure. Read together, Nguyen's novels connect the history of Vietnamese immigration to the US to larger questions of gender, national identity, and exclusion. Likewise, these novels highlight the importance of place by focusing on the Vietnamese American isolation and integration in the Midwest in relation to American myths of westward expansion and the frontier. Growing up in predominantly white neighborhoods in the Midwest, Nguyen's protagonists search for their place in a national narrative that has long excluded people like them.

In a broader sense, the social and political exclusion figured in Nguyen's novels speaks equally to a gap in scholarship on the Vietnamese American literary tradition and Asian Americans in the Midwest. As recently as 2011, Marguerite Bich Nguyen hailed Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* as the first full-length study of Vietnamese American writers (183). Although historians and sociologists have paid considerable attention to the war and to refugee resettlement issues, scholars have been slow to recognize the interconnectedness of these issues and the Vietnamese American literary tradition. At the same time, Vietnamese American writers have both wrestled with the histories of the war and moved beyond it, in part pushing back against readers' expectations that they will focus on the war. Novelist Viet

Thanh Nguyen, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), describes a flourishing of Vietnamese American writers in the last few decades "who are not writing about the war" (30). Pelaud points to the 1997 anthology of Vietnamese American writing, *Watermark*, as "emphasizing literary value over ethnographic reportage and the pressure to write about the war" (34). There is much room for scholars to explore new directions in Vietnamese American writing.

Likewise, as Bich Minh Nguyen argues, Asian Americans in the Midwest have been overlooked by scholarly attention to the coasts. Nguyen has written about the feeling of isolation that she had growing up in the Midwest and that she feels is exacerbated by scholarly inattention to the stories of Asian Americans in flyover country:

> If there's one element that marks the varied and complicated experience of Asian Americans in Michigan, it may be the understanding of isolation.... While the experience of Asian Americans on the coasts is well documented, those of us from the middle of the country may sometimes wonder if our experiences matter. We wonder how we ended up where we did, and what we can claim as our own. ("Afterword" 332)

As Nguyen points out in this passage, scholarly inattention to Asian Americans in Midwestern states like Michigan has exacerbated a sense of invisibility and isolation in the region. Focusing on the coastal experience of Asian Americans risks erasing the particularity of regional differences in history and experience, as well as missing an opportunity to, as Yen Lee Espiritu argues, "open up the category 'Vietnamese American'...by articulating the localistic, familial, national, and transnational linkages of Vietnamese lives" (15). This essay takes seriously Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu and Min Song's invitation to explore "[w]hat happens to this category [Asian American] when we centralize peoples from places like South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and the Pacific Islands?" (xxi).

Reading Nguyen's novels as opening up questions of both the local—that is, the Vietnamese immigrant community and family histories of refugees and immigrants in Michigan—and the geopolitical invites a critical regionalist approach that points to shifting and contingent notions of the West. Such a critical regionalist approach would be, as Neil Campbell explains, attentive to the "productive tension between region and world"—and between the local and the global (44). As Krista Comer has argued, critical regionalism is "a method of critical or global study attuned both to comparative big picture analysis and linked to the deep local" (154). A critical regionalist lens that is attentive both to place and to global and national politics illustrates the particularities of Nguyen's protagonist's textual search for a space for Vietnamese immigrants in the national origin story that the *Little House* books represent, but also the connection between Vietnamese immigration and broader political struggles.

Across Nguyen's work, she is concerned both with what it means to be Asian American in the Midwest and with the ways that her identity as an Asian American woman in the Midwest is contingent on shifting notions of the West, as well as on shifting notions of who belongs and who does not in the national body politic. Likewise, Nguyen points to individual stories of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, which she sees as bound up with national discourses over race, immigration, and the politics of isolation. For this reason, her work is ripe for a critical regionalist reading attentive to the ways in which she draws on national attitudes and histories to shape a geographically specific meditation on the Vietnamese American search for identity in the Midwest.

Rewriting Exclusion: *Pioneer Girl* in Search of a *Little House*

Bich Minh Nguyen is most well known for her engagement with the *Little House* books in *Pioneer Girl* and for her account of trying to fit in as a Vietnamese refugee growing up in Michigan in her memoir *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007). As Lee Lien, her protagonist in *Pioneer Girl*, points out, she and her brother "grew up as American kids, though we might have looked to others like foreigners" (30). Both *Pioneer Girl* and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* look to the figure of Laura Ingalls Wilder as a just-out-of-reach symbol of American identity, although *Pioneer Girl* explores the search for a connection between Wilder and the protagonist more extensively. In these texts, Wilder's narrative stands in for a national mythology of pioneers conquering the West against which Nguyen's protagonist shapes her identity and searches to understand her family's sense of rootlessness in the Midwest. This notion of the frontier West as a framework for identity echoes Neil Campbell's idea of "westness" as an entity that "flows…in and out of different structures and communities, being used, adjusted, celebrated, and critiqued in diverse ways" (45). Lee's sense of self is defined against the idea of the frontier West that Wilder constructed, just as her sense of isolated self in the Midwest is defined up against an idea that life is easier for Asians in the far western US, such as in California, because there is a larger Asian community there. These ideas of the West and the Midwest are constructions, shown to be, as Campbell argues, "a complex process…continually being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in multiple spaces" (44). Nguyen's *Pioneer Girl* draws on notions of the West in its depiction of an extended search for similarities between Wilder's narrative of pioneer life and Lee's experience as a Vietnamese American in the late twentieth-century Midwest.

Lee Lien's attempt to find herself in Wilder's novels, a series that she sees as holding tremendous power as a foundational myth of national identity, echoes the sense of alienation experienced by many readers of color. For many, the *Little House* books have stood in as imaginative proxies for the myth of an exclusively white pioneering self-reliance that has excluded readers of color. Anita Clair Fellman has traced the dislocations experienced

by generations of *Little House* readers, especially readers of color, aware of the centrality of this narrative to the mythology of American history, but alienated by the racism, erasure of Native American presence, and emphasis on white identity in the novels. As Fellman points out, "Not only are all the 'good' characters in the books all white..., but the series also gives the strong impression that it was white people on their own who settled the United States....[and thus] white readers are affirmed in their unquestioning sense that they are the major characters in the drama of the nation" (175). The novels' marginalization of non-white characters, alongside its assertion that whites have a central role in settling the nation, leaves little room for non-white readers to see themselves in Wilder's narrative of settling the West. Indeed, Pa says as much to Laura in *Little House on the Prairie* when he tells her, "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. That's why we're here, 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" (237). Pa is clear in his belief that Native Americans, who have in fact gotten there first, must be moved aside in order to make way for the inevitable role that "white settlers" will play in settling the country. At no point does Wilder's narrative question Pa's insistence that there is no place for non-whites in the new American landscape.

The retelling of the *Little House* novels by writers of color has been a key act of recuperation in the last twenty years. Emily Anderson and Belén Martín-Lucas have pointed to Asian American writers' rewriting of the *Little House* books and their television adaptations as attempts to "explore questions of transnational identity and the experiences of Asian immigrants to North America" (1003). As Martín-Lucas argues, for Asian American writers like Nguyen, the *Little House* books invite both identification with Laura's experience of resettlement and alienation because of the "irreconcilable differences in their racialized experiences" (33). Describing Nguyen's discussion of *Little House* in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Martín-Lucas notes that "[t]he dream of becoming Laura Ingalls requires the absolute obliteration of her Asian identity" (35). Likewise, Karin Beeler has examined how Japanese Canadian writer Hiromi Goto weaves allusions to *Little House* in her novel *The Kappa Child* to explore "a Japanese-Canadian family's encounter with the Canadian prairie" (57) and, in key ways, to contrast the sense of alienation experienced by characters in Goto's novel.

One of the best known examples of an author writing back against the *Little House* books is Louise Erdrich's *Birchbark House* series, which is widely seen as an answer to the *Little House* books through the indigenous perspective. Michelle Pagni Stewart has argued that Erdrich's *Birchbark House* series uses intertextuality to mediate negative stereotypes and omissions in classic novels like *Little House on the Prairie* and Elizabeth George Speare's captivity

narrative *Calico Captive* (1957) by "acknowledging the problems inherent in these older texts and articulating a more truthful view of American Indian culture and history" (217). In Stewart's view, this approach does not attempt to censure or censor the *Little House* books, but rather offers another perspective that can mediate their racism and historical inaccuracy.

In Nguyen's retelling of the *Little House* books in *Pioneer Girl*, Lee links Wilder's narrative to her own family's story, which reaches back to her parents' life in Vietnam before fleeing to the US in 1975. According to the family story that Lee has been told, Wilder's daughter Rose Wilder Lane, a writer who has been credited with shaping Wilder's reminiscences into a saleable narrative, visited Lee's grandfather's cafe in Saigon several times when she was researching a story for *Woman's Day* in 1965.[1] This incident in the novel is based on an actual 1965 trip that Lane made to Vietnam that resulted in her publishing "August in Viet Nam" in *Woman's Day* later that year. In the novel's imagining of that trip, on her last visit to the cafe, Lane left behind a gold pin, which has stayed in the family and which Lee suspects is the same pin that Laura Ingalls Wilder describes receiving as a gift from her husband Almanzo in *These Happy Golden Years*. Lee's desire to authenticate the pin as the same one that Wilder passed along to her daughter represents Lee's hope to find a place for herself and her family in the *Little House* mythology. As Sharon Tran argues, this search for the pin's origins is more than just a detective story within this narrative of ethnic identity: "As is common in ethnic literature, the detective plot that structures *Pioneer Girl* doubles as a quest for identity and belonging. Lee's drive to unravel the literary mystery of the gold pin stems from a desire to write herself into an American classic, to claim a material connection with the America embodied by the Wilders" (116).

In the novel, Lee makes clear that the *Little House* books have for her long represented the contradictions and myths at the core of American identity:

> The *Little House* books were American classics....they represented an idealized, old-fashioned landscape of pioneering, making do, and scraping by, no matter how forced the veneer of family life and good cheer....my own concept of American history had been unknowingly shaped just 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 pictures and edged out of history. (248)

As Lee explains, the image of pioneer life figured in the *Little House* books has shaped her own idea of American history, a history from which she feels excluded. Her reference to Chinese workers who were left out of histories of the railroad gestures at a larger point about exclusion: her family are pioneers on the same terms described in her novels, "making do, and scraping by." Her family's experience as immigrants making a new life in a new country closely

resembles the pioneer image in the *Little House* books, and the invisibility of immigrants as pioneers explains her "paradox of pride and resentment."

Beyond the material evidence of the pin, the closest connection between the *Little House* books and Lee's family's experience comes in her description of crisscrossing the Midwest as her mother and grandfather move between a series of positions managing Chinese buffets. Although the protagonist does not tell us what impels her mother and grandfather to change restaurants so often, there is a clear echo of the Ingalls family's continuous moves whenever Laura's father felt that there was too much settlement around them. As Laura explains before yet another move, "Pa did not like a country so old and worn out that the hunting was poor. He wanted to go west. For two years he had wanted to go west and take a homestead" (*Silver Lake* 3). Like Pa, Lee's family resists settling down, moving from one opportunity to the next. Instead of a covered wagon, their movement across the Midwest is undertaken in an old car, with her father's ashes in an urn up front: "We drove on, all of us confined together in the old Mercury....A new restaurant. A new town. A new apartment....In the back, [my brother] Sam and I stared out the windows at the electric wires leading us deeper into the big Midwest that was the only landscape we knew" (5). Her childhood was made up of a series of shifts across the Midwest; Lee lists nine towns that she lives in before her family settles down in Franklin, Illinois, so that the children can go to high school in the same place.

Just as her family moved restlessly before settling down out of necessity, Lee and her brother feel the same restlessness to leave some part of their identity, or perhaps the connection to her family and the life that they lived, behind. Thinking of Pa's and Laura's restlessness, Lee muses:

> In our own way, Sam and I had felt that restlessness too. That 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. The fact was, we had grown up Asian American in a mostly white landscape. There were consequences for that: a sense of imbalance, a subconscious avoidance of mirrors. Who wouldn't want to be rid of that, untethered from such fixed identity? (84)

Like Pa and Laura who see constant movement and the search for an ever more open and wild frontier as an opportunity for a new beginning, Lee and her brother feel a similar restlessness driven by a desire for the possibility of restarting on their own terms. In their case, however, they are locked in their family's situation and in the fact of their Asian American identity in a landscape where they are always seen as the other. Later in the novel, when Lee has met up with Rose's grandson and he talks about his ancestors' constant moves, she thinks, "my family too had wandered and settled, had sought a home in the Western world that they'd never quite found" (214). This line points to an ambiguity for Lee's family: is it a "home" that they "never quite found" or the "Western world" itself? The elusive "Western

world" that she alludes to suggests a search for a mythical frontier West, or even the US as a land of opportunity, that remains out of reach for this family of immigrants.

When Lee's brother moves to San Francisco, it is part of a desire to avoid the isolation of being Asian in the Midwest and to live in a landscape among others who look like him. Although Lee resents his decision to leave behind family responsibilities, she also sympathizes with his decision, reflecting that it is harder to be an Asian in the Midwest than on the coasts: "Why would anyone in the Midwest, especially a nonwhite person, want to stay there? How could life not be better out West, in California?" (198). Just like the "home" in the mythical West that Lee's family "never quite found," this passage suggests a fantasy about California as another West, and in this case a West where Asian American identity is less fraught because less isolated. Like the "Western world" that disappointed her family, the West of California also may not live up to her and her brother's expectations. Unlike Pa, who wants to get away from areas that are too thickly settled, Lee sees a comfort in being in a larger and more established Asian community in California. When Lee visits her brother in San Francisco, she recognizes the desire for a landscape where it is possible to fit in: "And then Sam too would become one of the Asian Americans who made up more than a quarter of this city, whose thinness and quick walk and cool clothes would inspire a visitor like me to marvel at how many driven, successful, capable Asians lived here, and how happy and easy their lives must be" (199). Lee's assumption that the Asians in San Francisco have "happy and easy" lives is based largely on externals like "thinness" and "cool clothes," superficial elements that invite a skeptical reading. Lee's expectation that Asian lives in San Francisco are more seamless sets up yet another mythology of the US West.

The contrast between an idealized San Francisco where Asians have easier lives because they are surrounded by people like them and the isolated Midwest is symbolized by the Chinese buffets in which her family works, restaurants that echo the ways in which Asian identity is flattened out and rendered invisible in a culture blind to the differences between Asian nationalities. These Chinese buffets, Lee tells us, are everywhere: "no matter where you go, mountains or seaside or flatness, you will always find, just off an interstate or country road or tucked into a strip mall on a commercial pass, a worn-out looking Chinese buffet" (48). These ubiquitous Chinese buffets, Lee points out, are striking for their appearance in a landscape where there are few Asian Americans. Seeing them, she tells us, inspires a sense of wonder: "How did that restaurant happen? Are actual Asian people running it? How did those poor souls end up here in the middle of nowhere?" (52).

Not only do those restaurants represent an anomaly of "Asian stuff!" (49) in the middle of flyover country, but for Lee they also represent the trap that her family has been stuck in, taken for granted by their customers as embodying

a generic Asian identity that is part of the backdrop: "My family was one of those you might have wondered about....Interchangeably waiters, busboys, cooks—my parents ran the place in tandem. They weren't Chinese, and neither had any training as a cook. But it didn't matter because the customers didn't know the difference" (52-53). To the customers who frequent these buffets, the Liens' individuality or identity as Vietnamese Americans is unimaginable and therefore, in effect, erased. As Lee notes, "A lot of the customers assumed we didn't speak English, and therefore we were invisible to them" (54). The invisibility is doubled here: not only does Lee's family's Vietnamese identity disappear behind the assumption of Chinese identity—an assumption based on erasing differences among Asians—but their identity also disappears behind the assumption that to be Asian necessarily makes them foreign and unable to speak English. Ironically, because Lee and her family stand out as Asian in the Midwest, they are invisible to their customers who see their foreignness as just part of the decoration.

Although her friends in grad school scorn Chinese buffets like these as inauthentic, they represent something authentic to Lee because they are part of her family's history: "In grad school, no one I knew would have dreamed of eating at such a place; everyone wanted *authentic* food, street food, real food, none of this boneless almond chicken bullshit. It still felt embarrassing to admit that, for me, these kinds of buffets *had* been an authentic American experience" (137). The symbolism of food as a mode for inclusion and exclusion is a key theme in Nguyen's work, and the desire for inclusion through food is most clearly articulated in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, in which she describes her desire to fit in through the lens of her desire for American junk food. Likewise, in a 2012 editorial in the *New York Times*, she emphasizes the ways in which food represented a sense of belonging: "For me, a child of Vietnamese immigrants growing up in Michigan in the 1980s, Twinkies were a ticket to assimilation: the golden cake, more golden than the hair I wished I had, filled with sweet white cream. Back then, junk foods seemed to represent an ideal of American indulgence" ("Goodbye" A23).

Edged out of a national narrative of white pioneers that excludes them, and rendered invisible by the white customers, and by extension many of her neighbors, who fail to recognize her family's essential humanity beyond their Asian identity, Lee seeks to find a place for her Vietnamese roots in the national narrative. As Tran points out, "Nguyen's novel asks to what extent immigrants can be considered modern pioneers" (117). Further, as Tran argues, "Nguyen calls attention to how both pioneers and immigrants are searching for a home, their journeys characterized by a profound sense of displacement, as they must learn how to adapt to new environments unsure if they would truly feel at home anywhere" (117). Finding a home in the *Little House* books becomes a way for Lee to render her own family's story legible and to assert their place in the national narrative.

***Short Girls*, Vietnamese Immigration, and Post-9/11 Politics of Exclusion**

The search for a place in national narratives of American history that *Pioneer Girl* depicts takes on a more urgent and politicized dimension when viewed alongside Nguyen's *Short Girls*. In *Short Girls*, Nguyen insists on the link between the Vietnamese immigrant community in Michigan, including but not limited to refugees, and the highly politicized stance toward immigrants in the post-9/11 environment. *Short Girls* focuses on the personal relationships and tensions in the lives of Van and Linny Luong, two Vietnamese American sisters whose parents had fled Saigon in 1975. Their personal conflicts and relationships play out against the backdrop of their father's citizenship ceremony and his search to be recognized as an inventor of products aimed at easing the lives of short people. Their father's search for legitimacy as an American citizen and as a professional is deeply bound up in his identity as a Vietnamese male, seen by the daughters as the typical unapproachable "Asian Dad," more closely attached to a homosocial group whose activities are primarily drinking and gambling (188). Just as Van's marriage falls apart, her father summons her and her sister home to celebrate his citizenship ceremony. As mentioned in the opening section of this essay, however, becoming a citizen isn't just about a document for Dinh Luong, but rather reflects a larger coming to terms with his identity in relation to the US and to the immigrant community. By taking the oath of citizenship, he both leaves his refugee status behind and re-embraces the Vietnamese community that experienced those early years in the US alongside him and his family.

Against the backdrop of the Luong family's experience as immigrants, Van's work as a lawyer brings together a larger immigrant community in Michigan. Van works with "asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants looking to sponsor relatives" at the International Center, "a hub of immigrant law in downtown Detroit that brought Latino, Asian, and Middle Eastern communities into its fold" (44). She has taken on this work out of a sense of mission, and she is devastated after losing a deportation case for a client named Vijay Sastri, who had hoped to "settle in, work his way up the salary rung, eventually buy a house in one of the suburbs; his children would grow up completely American, shun Vijay's customs for those of their white friends at school. It was going to be the typical immigrant story" (48). Just as Nguyen's novels confront idealized notions of the West and national mythologies of the frontier as a space of opportunity, Nguyen exposes here another romanticized mythology: that of the "typical immigrant story." Like Pa's search for increased opportunity through open land, the immigrant narrative that has driven people like Sastri is a belief in linear progression toward higher salary and more stability in the shape of a home and Americanized kids who will seek to separate themselves from their parents. Like the mythology of westward movement as upward mobility in *Pioneer Girl*, this one is revealed as unattainable for Sastri because of legal problems that are ultimately inextricable from US hostility toward

immigrants after 9/11. When Sastri is arrested in November 2001 for fleeing a car crash, and then found with a gun in his car, Van is unable to keep him from being deported. The fact that he had a gun in his possession makes his case impossible for Van to successfully defend, particularly in the atmosphere of heightened suspicion toward immigrants in the post-9/11 period:

> If Vijay had been drunk-driving, or simply a bad driver, Van knew she could have kept him in the country. But certain offences—drug possession, domestic violence, and firearm possession without a license—were pretty much nonnegotiable. The case went to trial in January 2002, a time when judges were less than generous with immigrants. (71)

The tightening of immigration policies, including judicial attitudes that are "less than generous with immigrants," is described here as directed toward the perceived potential for violence. In this atmosphere of heightened anxiety, an offence like drunk driving, although potentially dangerous, is somehow seen as less of a threat than carrying a firearm.

Stricter enforcement of immigration measures in the immediate aftermath of September 11 are, of course, part of a larger history of US ambivalence toward immigration, including the period following the fall of Saigon in 1975. As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud points out, the influx of Vietnamese Americans in 1975 "represents the largest population movement to America since the immigration of Jews during and after World War II" (8). The South Vietnamese who came to the US as refugees were fleeing retaliation by the Communist government because of their collaboration with the US and their association with the Republic of Viet Nam in the South. In many cases, they endured considerable hardship, including financial and personal losses, in coming to the US, where they had to start over entirely in communities that were often hostile to them. Thi Bui's graphic novel/memoir, *The Best We Could Do* (2017), illustrates the emotional devastation suffered by the protagonist's parents when their degrees from Vietnam are not recognized in the US and they have to take low-wage, unskilled labor instead (69). Vietnamese American texts like Bui's center on the experience of coming to the US and the sense of alienation from both a homeland and a culture that seems distant and ultimately out of reach. Bui's protagonist seeks a reverse journey "over the ocean through the war seeking an origin story that will set everything right" (40-41). This journey, she argues, is especially necessary for the 1.5 generation—the immigrants who arrived as small children and feel disconnected both from their Vietnamese homeland and from the US, where they are often treated as unwelcome outsiders. As Pelaud points out, "[a]t the end of the Viet Nam War, public opinion polls showed that 54 percent of Americans opposed receiving Vietnamese refugees, and only 36 percent favored their immigration" (13-14). Feeling alienated from both a US culture that does not seem to want them and parents who are haunted by an immigrant history that they won't fully reveal to their children, Bui's

protagonist seeks to "record our family history...thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and present...I could fill the void between my parents and me. And that if I could see Viêt Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost...I would see my parents as real people...and learn to love them better" (37). Bui's protagonist's sense of isolation both from Vietnam and from her parents echoes the alienation felt by Nguyen's female characters whose narratives stem from a similar impulse to locate one's self in a family, community, and history from which they feel alienated.

This negotiation of the relationship between the past and present characterizes texts like Nguyen's and Bui's that explore the immigrant experience. Writing about the in-betweenness of immigrant identity, Bharati Mukherjee points to the naturalization oath that asks new citizens to "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen" (680). Mukherjee powerfully rejects the possibility of renunciation that this oath requires: "[H]ow exactly," Mukherjee asks, "does the immigrant absolutely renounce her earlier self, her fidelity to family history and language 'without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion'?" (681). Immigrant identity, in Mukherjee's formulation, is articulated in what she terms "literature of new arrival," a literature that rejects assimilation, embraces hybridity, and "centers on the nuanced process of *rehousement* after the trauma of forced or voluntary *unhousement*" (683). This embracing of hybridity is a necessary corollary to the immigrant identity in the diaspora that Mukherjee describes.

Nguyen's work is deeply concerned with the immigrant experience, and inflected by the sense of the precarity and dislocation suffered by children of immigrants whose childhood has been haunted by the refugee experience of their parents. The articulation of immigrant identity in her novels encompasses two key elements: the sense of disconnection on the part of children of Vietnamese refugees and the rhetoric of hostility in the US toward refugees. Nguyen makes these connections most clear in *Short Girls*, where she ties post-9/11 anti-immigration policies directly to their impacts on the Vietnamese American community's hopes of achieving citizenship and the legitimacy conferred on them by becoming what the protagonist's father repeatedly mislabels as a "normalized citizen" (127). There is a sense that they are always on trial, apt at any moment to make a mistake that will jeopardize their citizenship application, as in the case of Na Dau, a family friend of the Luongs whose drunk driving arrest triggers fears that he will not only fail in becoming a citizen, but be put in a US detention center because Vietnam did not begin accepting deportees until an agreement was reached with the US in 2008 (Preston A21).

Throughout *Short Girls*, Nguyen reminds us of the instability and heightened fear in the immigrant community in the years following 9/11. Although the targeting of Muslims got the most press coverage in this period,

Nguyen's novel highlights the ways in which immigrant communities as a whole were hard hit by increased hostilities toward immigrants and the subsequent tightening of restrictions. Although she decides to quit her job at the International Center because of her sense of failure in the Vijay Sastri case, Van continues to work with immigration cases once she's joined a new firm that specializes in H-1B visas. Because of her work, Van is highly aware of how bewildering the citizenship process can be for applicants, a process that only becomes more anxiety-inducing once the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has been subsumed by the Department of Homeland Security: "it was clear to Van that under the Department of Homeland Security, the process was going to get tougher and the number of visas would soon shrink" (79). While her father fails to see the connection between his own application for citizenship and the larger political changes, Van does. When she hears that his citizenship has been approved, she expresses relief:

> "Just in time too," she tells him. "It's a really good thing we sent your application when we did."
>
> "What you mean?"
>
> "INS is being taken over by the Department of Homeland Security. It's going to be a huge mess."
>
> "It's no difference to me."
>
> "Well, it will be to a lot of people." (51)

Although her father is unable or unwilling to link his application for citizenship to national politics, it is clear to Van that they cannot be separated. What may seem like a uniquely Vietnamese refugee-to-citizen narrative is tied to the fate of immigrants throughout the US in this period.

There is a tight connection between Van's personal experience—both in her crumbling marriage and in her connection to the immigrant community—and her desire to help other immigrants whose positions have only become more tenuous in the post-9/11 environment. Her inability to stop the deportation of Vijay Sastri becomes bound up in her failed marriage, and this sense of despair becomes heightened when her parents' friends ask her to help Na Dau apply for citizenship. When Na Dau is picked up for a second DUI, it emerges that he has been haunted by the precarity of his condition as non-citizen: "Na had become obsessed...with asking around for immigration stories gone bad. Na had heard about a guy from Thailand who'd been deported, even after living in Oregon for twenty years as a permanent resident. He talked about people being detained at camps, with no access to a lawyer, for years" (275). Spurred on by this fear, Na Dau runs away, and Van imagines him becoming "one of those shadowy underground figures slipping in and out of restaurants, his every day weighed against the worry of being caught, pointed at, named illegal" (275). Na Dau's position as Vietnamese immigrant becomes bound up with US policies toward immigration in the post-9/11 period and their very real implications

for immigrants of all nationalities who live in fear of becoming visible to the US government. In this way, Nguyen rejects the narrative of Vietnamese immigrants as a special case, one which Espiritu argues "has been key to the (re)cuperation of American identities and the shoring up of U.S. militarism in the post-Vietnam War era" (2), in favor of drawing links to broader national narratives of hostility to immigrants in a heightened security state.

Conclusion

The passages that open this essay point both to the explicit and veiled language of threat directed toward Middle Eastern men in the post-9/11 moment, rhetoric that has sharpened in recent years in response to ISIS-inspired attacks in the West and in Donald Trump's attempts to ban Muslims. In *Short Girls*, Nguyen draws a link between the Vietnamese American community in Michigan and US policies that are hostile to immigrants and that target non-whites who are labeled "illegal" because of circumstances that make it difficult for them to secure documentation. As this narrative suggests, US citizenship is tenuous, just as inclusion is tenuous for the children of immigrants in *Pioneer Girl.* By linking the position of Vietnamese immigrants in Michigan to narratives of exclusion, narratives that have been most visible for Muslims in the state, Nguyen insists both on the particularity of Vietnamese American immigration and the necessity of making it visible in our national narratives. Through these two novels, Nguyen has insisted on a place for Vietnamese Americans in our most romanticized national myths, as symbolized by Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, and in our ongoing shameful history of politicized hostility toward Muslims and immigrants.

By linking the Vietnamese American characters in her novels' experience to larger national political narratives, Nguyen takes up the opportunity to see migration more broadly in terms of political structures that affect different groups in unique ways but that are also part of a larger picture. Timothy August has identified an aesthetic trend in writing about exile that has lengthened out, rather than left behind, narration of refugee stories, a move that he sees as "reveal[ing] the common ground that exists between their own and other refugee communities—a powerful action that calls out the role the U.S. empire continues to play in driving a global history of displacement" (68). While Nguyen's novels focus on the children of refugees, and *Pioneer Girl* does not linger on Lee's family's experience as refugees, she nevertheless draws on narratives of displacement, isolation, and precarity to illuminate how US policies and attitudes have perpetuated a sense of statelessness for immigrants *and* for non-white US citizens when they cannot see themselves in national narratives.

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NOTE

[1] For more on Rose Wilder Lane's editing of Wilder's manuscript, see Pamela Smith Hill's "'Will it come to Anything?': The Story of *Pioneer Girl*" in *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* (2014).

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