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Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization Across Guam and Israel-Palestine

Lori Selke^a 

BOOK REVIEW

Evelyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi. *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization Across Guam and Israel-Palestine*. University of California Press, 2022, 266 pp. ISBN: 9780520379657 (softcover, open-access ebook).

HISTORY Published 2024-05-13

The Vietnamese word for **homeland**, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi tells us in **Archipelago of Resettlement**, is not actually **land** at all. It is **nu'ó'c**, which means water. In the Vietnamese language, home is fluid, changeable, always in motion.

The organizing metaphor of Gandhi's book is the archipelago, islands scattered in the ocean, separate yet connected, perhaps geographically, perhaps culturally, perhaps historically. Gandhi chooses Guam and Israel-Palestine as her sites of discussion in part to deliberately decentre the continental United States from her discussion of the relationship between colonial powers and refugee settlers. Most literature discussing the Vietnamese diaspora has naturally focused on the US as its main site of inquiry, both because it is where the majority of refugee Vietnamese settled and because the US had such a direct hand in creating the situation that the refugees were fleeing. The shadow of US foreign policy looms large over both Guam and Israel-Palestine, of

course, but the unfamiliar setting gives the reader a chance to think about the history of Vietnamese resettlement from a different perspective.

It might seem at first that refugees and Indigenous peoples might make natural allies. After all, both are wrestling with displacement. However, as Gandhi illustrates, refugees are more likely to attempt to assimilate themselves into the settler colonial way of being—at least at first. It is, in part, the price of being a grateful guest. Sometimes, as in the case of the Israeli government, settler colonial states are quite aware of this tendency and choose to exploit it for their own propaganda purposes.

Much of **Archipelago of Resettlement** discusses history, but it avoids telling the stories that are better known. Instead, Gandhi focuses on hidden historical entanglements. For example, she shows how US imperial ambitions focused on the Pacific for most of the twentieth century, shifting exactly when the US withdrew from Vietnam and, almost

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simultaneously, Israel surprised the world by winning the Six-Day War. Suddenly, US foreign policy pivoted to its present concern with the Middle East, where—at least for a while—the possibilities for victory and expansion of global influence seemed more likely to bear fruit. This connection is rarely if ever discussed even by observers well versed in the American imperial project; yet the moment Gandhi delineates the connection, it becomes indisputable.

In 1975, after the fall of Saigon to Communist forces, Guam became the primary processing centre for refugees fleeing the collapse of the South Vietnamese government. Guam was chosen as the initial landing site for this first wave of refugees, dubbed “Operation New Life,” in part due to its proximity as a highly militarized US territory in the Pacific, with the US military acting as the largest landowner in Guam. However, most of these refugees spent only a short time in the territory. Most of the approximately 111,000 Vietnamese refugees who were transported to Guam as part of Operation New Life were of high social status, with connections to the US government and military, and most ultimately chose to settle more or less permanently in the continental United States. Many spent only weeks in Guam. Although in May 1975 the refugee camp known as “Tent City” hosted almost 40,000 residents on a naval base at Orote Point, by the end of June 1975 the camp was closed, emptied. However, a small number of refugees did choose to remain, opening the possibility, according to Gandhi, of developing a “decolonial solidarity” (p. 145) with the Indigenous Chamorro population. Today, about 300–400 Vietnamese Americans live on Guam.

Meanwhile, in 1976, newly elected Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin’s first official act was to welcome a small group of

what were soon to be called Vietnamese “boat people” to settle in Israel, granting them a path to naturalization and citizenship that no non-Jewish group had been granted before—or since. Begin’s gesture was intended to be an example to the world of Israel’s humanitarian heart, a recognition by one displaced people of another. The reality was, unsurprisingly, more complicated in execution than the photo-op occasion appeared. Gandhi tells of how some Vietnamese refugees were offered resettlement in Israel but refused, worried about, among other things, the political stability of a nation so recently at war with its neighbours. Gandhi also reveals that Israeli officials favoured large, intact Chinese-ethnic families with high education levels, deliberately overlooking widows and orphans as well as refugees from neighbouring Cambodia and Laos when offering asylum. Ultimately, only about 366 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Israel-Palestine.

Archipelago of Resettlement’s primary goal is to bring settler colonial studies into dialogue with critical refugee studies in order to theorize for the first time what Gandhi terms “the refugee settler condition” (p. 2). Gandhi is particularly on the lookout for places where settler refugees can resist and/or refuse settler logics and ally themselves instead with the decolonial project. This is relatively easily seen in the case of Guam. Many Chamorros (Indigenous Guamanians) served in Vietnam as part of the US Armed Forces, and Gandhi describes several instances where Chamorro vets recognized the anti-colonial struggle of the Vietnamese people as akin to their own attempts to assert Indigenous sovereignty. Both Vietnamese and Chamorro peoples also note similarities in climate, vegetation, and geography that made Guam a soft landing for those displaced from Vietnam. Gandhi draws from archival materials in Guam as well as oral histories and a

student-teacher blog to construct a portrait of the refugees who chose to stay in Guam rather than treat it as a stopover to their “New Life” elsewhere.

In the case of Israel-Palestine, it becomes harder to discern the connections between Vietnamese refugees and displaced Palestinians. The Israeli narrative insists that Jewish settlers are, after all, just another set of displaced persons, just like the Vietnamese refugees they welcomed. This official narrative was reinforced by speeches by Israeli leaders to the United Nations and the public at large, as well as news clippings and promotional materials from the Israeli government, which repeatedly showcased Vietnamese refugees expressing gratitude for Israel’s humanitarian intervention on their behalf, or what Gandhi describes as narratives that “ventriloquize[d] the Zionist narrative of state benevolence and refugee indebtedness” (p. 121). However, a closer look allows Gandhi to identify some points of commonality between the Palestinians and their Vietnamese refugee neighbours. Despite their initial welcome and privileged path to citizenship, most Vietnamese refugees in Israel never learned Hebrew and ended up working low-paying jobs in their communities. Many families returned to Vietnam in the years that followed. Those who stayed, like many refugees in other areas of the world, found themselves treated as permanent guests—as outsiders. Gandhi also visually demonstrates via the inclusion of a full-colour map by French artist Julien Bousac how Palestine, too, is increasingly an archipelago, fragmented by encroaching Israeli settlements.

In addition to her exploration of archival materials and oral histories in Guam and Israel-Palestine, Gandhi gives a great deal of her attention to films, books, and other texts that explore decolonial perspectives of

Vietnamese refugees in all three sites—the United States, Guam, and Israel-Palestine. The queer art films of Vietnamese American filmmaker Quyen Nguyen-Le, the poetry of and documentary about Vietnamese Israeli poet Vaan Nguyen, and the novel **Pioneer Girl** by Vietnamese American author Bich Minh Nguyen are all scrutinized at length, especially for sites of resistance to settler colonial narratives and signs of potential solidarity with Indigenous and other post-colonial struggles.

A book like this is long overdue. I, for one, have taken note of the tension between Indigenous decolonial projects and refugee realities, and have long wondered how refugees “fit” into the decolonial project. While the field of critical refugee studies (in which Gandhi’s mother, Yê’n Lê Espiritu, is a founding figure) tackles this issue in general, specific discussions of connections and conflicts between Indigenous peoples and refugee settlers are still fairly new to the literature of the field. **Archipelagos of Resettlement** allows complexity and nuance to unfold when looking for those points of friction and connection. Gandhi admits that although she documents many small but significant moments of refusal on the part of Vietnamese refugees to be used to further settler colonial narratives, for the most part the alliances she envisions between Indigenous decolonial struggles and resettled refugees are speculative and yet to be realized. Her analysis of the potentialities, however, is an important step towards those alliances. Gandhi has mapped out a conceptual space for future scholarship, art, and action that dares to step away from comfortable settler narratives into a volatile, fluid, and ever-shifting, but at the same time more interconnected, archipelagic post-colonial future.

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