Beyond Kinh(ship): The Making of Vietnamese Settler Refugeeism Through Land and Dispossession

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Abstract

In 1954, the US expanded its military presence in South Viet Nam following decolonization from France, claiming to help refugees escape communism. However, Vietnamese people rarely use the term "refugee," seeing themselves as internally displaced people who never crossed international borders. I examine how the concept of "refugee" functions as a settler colonial technology that fosters Vietnamese settler refugeeism, serving both the US empire and Vietnamese ethnonationalist goals. The article explores two key points: first, how refugee resettlement in the Cái Sắn canals consolidated Kinh dominance and dispossessed Indigenous Khmer Krom in the Mekong Delta; second, what it means to engage with the land as a form of relationship-building. Centering internally displaced Vietnamese within the land's history, this work offers a counter-narrative to US state-sponsored historiography. Grounded in migration and settler colonial studies and engaging with Vietnamese studies, I posit that the internal refugees should not be treated solely as a pathological or juridical object, but rather as an analytical category linked to broader practices of domination and exploitation.

The Making of Vietnamese Settler Refugeeism

After France lost the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, the 1954 Geneva Accords divided the country at the 17th parallel into two provisional states, North and South Viet Nam, allowing for reunification and rebuilding of the nation.[1] The US, nevertheless, saw Viet Nam as a "free country" (a modern-day terra nullius) without any principal foreign power and in need of modernization and capitalist development. Following the Korean

War and under the premise of supporting the Viet Nam sovereignty movement, the US increased its military presence in South Viet Nam to assist with the internal refugee movement, colloquially known as Bắc 54.[2] The South Vietnamese government implemented major land reforms to resettle nearly a million northern migrants below the temporary military demarcation line, where about 12 million people lived. The Cái Sắn Project, in particular, offers important insights into land ownership, aiming to eliminate landlordism and transfer land ownership to smallholder peasants, ultimately facilitating a transition to cooperative farming in the future. While the US and the South Vietnamese government celebrated the success of this land reform effort, they also actively overlooked the dispossession of the Indigenous Khmer Krom from their own land.

Figure 1. Cái Sắn rice paddy field, 2024. Author's photo.

In this essay, I pivot away from anthropocentric and juridical analyses to ask: How does the resettlement of intranational refugees in the Mekong Delta act as a settler colonial technology that converts land into property, people into targets of subjection, and revolutionary nationalism into a settler nation? Settler colonialism is about the land (*see* Fig. 1). Yet, technologies to make land into property also remake Vietnamese bodies through the process of alienation, separation, and conversion. Within the Cold War vacuum and the global decolonial surge, internal refugees emerge from the patterning of violence into a binary relationship between receiving state-recognized protection and enacting settler violence through land dispossession. Consequently, unsettled Vietnamese bodies become exchangeable juridical objects to be used as needed by both the US and Viet Nam. I suggest repositioning internally displaced Vietnamese as *US refugees in Viet Nam*, where the US pseudo-legal system functions as settler technology, transforming Vietnamese bodies and land into legal objects driven by financial and political interests. To make this happen, refugees must be rescued at all costs to justify US expansionism and Vietnamese ethnonationalism. The manufactured legal apparatus must prioritize human lives over all other forms, such as land, air, water, plants, and animals; in doing so, Indigenous peoples are rendered disposable. Typically, European colonialism remains at the center of Western critiques of empire that often overlook preexisting relationships and histories within the region. In this work, I reject monocausal explanations that assign full responsibility for the violence and displacement to one actor; in reality, these catastrophic events are happening concurrently and globally, which dialectically inform and shape the ever-changing settler and expansionist logic of both the US and Viet Nam. The formation of South Viet Nam, therefore, should not be limited to the Cold War theater, but rather viewed as an active settler colonial state that thrived on US foreign policies as a technology advancing its ethnonationalist agenda. This essay weaves together historical accounts, archival data, and autoethnographic narratives, focusing on land and the articulation of the refugee, to examine the lasting impact of settler technology, scaling from national historiographies to personal narratives.

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> Over the course of two months, I regularly rode west for two hours on my motorbike from Can Tho to reach the top of Cái Sắn Canal. Looking down the river, I assumed it was a short ride along the canal, so I ignored my hunger, hoping to find a rest stop for a quick pick-me-up with coffee and banh mi during my first trip. However, over the next two hours along the 125-mile stretch, I was captivated by endless country homes with corrugated metal roofs, fish sauce factories, local wet markets, and sporadic ferries connecting the two sides of the canal. By the end of that

trip, I was saddened by the fact that I had not encountered as many rice paddy fields as the government documents described, assuming they had been converted to modern factories decades following the wars. A week later, I set off west again, confident that the sugar palm trees and Theravada temples would guide me. This time, I stopped for lunch much earlier in the day (*see* Fig. 2). However, as I returned to Can Tho late that night, the dull glow of streetlamps lit the dusty roads filled with the symphony of seasonal insects. I defaulted to Google Maps as my companion to ensure I would not get lost. Much to my surprise, the computerized maps led me down a series of narrow, unlit dirt roads that hugged the endless rice paddy fields. I realized I had found what I was looking for. The material remnant of the refugees is real. A week later, I embarked on my third trip, full of hope and excitement, knowing that I could finally witness the land and meet the people I had been reading and learning about. By the end of the day, I returned home with a phone full of picturesque images of rice paddy fields and stories from the locals. And yet, these images were only fragments of the histories, stories, and lives that remained untold. The land is not intended as a production of extractable knowledge, but rather as a model of world-making, a way of knowing, and a reading from the bottom-up. The locals are no longer refugees, their stories are no longer tied to the wars, and their histories remain within their families.

Nước Mía
Siêu Sạch
Cà phê mang đi
Nước Ép

Figure 2. Roadside sugar cane stall, 2024. Author's photo.

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As I traveled down the 125-mile stretch and sat with the land, I recognized the material reality and the fetishization of land and labor. In capitalist societies, the individual right to own land and resources is highly valued.[3] Property ownership is based on the right to purchase, sell, and pass it on to inheritors as they see fit. The land here is merely a commodity to be owned and fetishized among affluent individuals.[4] But how did a once colonized, now nominally socialist state come to develop this relationship to the land, and what provocations emerge from sitting within the land's personal and historical contradictions?

Rather than centering on the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 or the Refugee Act of 1980 that reinforces US exceptionalism post-war, I turn to Bắc 54.[5] By examining the Cold War theater through the lens of ethnic and Indigenous relations, I emphasize that the Second Indochina War was an ethnocentric conflict fought between the North and South Kinh people as two separate nation-states over ideological differences regarding decolonization, which greatly affected Indigenous ethnic minorities within the region. Moving beyond the Western hegemonic paradigm of Cold War biopolitics as governmentality, I am invested in how Bắc 54 were paradoxically granted humanity to be incorporated into the perverse ontology of settler becomings and yet still remain irrelevant to the US war machine. After the division of the country, anticommunist Vietnamese bodies became worthy of saving, worthy of liberation, worthy of being free from themselves to be folded into the globalized order of things. To be "free," under the rubrics of modernity, is to own land, to inherit wealth, and to master the nonhumans: thus, to become a colonizer. For colonized Vietnamese people to achieve freedom during the Cold War era and in the wake of global decolonization, they must take back the possession of what once was theirs. Nguyen Vo Thu Huong notes that the revolutionary slogan "Quyết tử để Tổ quốc quyết sinh" (Determined to die for the Fatherland to survive) highlights the expectation of colonized people's willingness to die or kill for their country's freedom.[6] The grammar of Bắc 54 highlights their liberation from communism and their transition to landownership through the dispossession of Indigenous Khmer Krom. Rather than viewing Indigeneity solely through the lens of ethnonationalism for juridical protections that relegate the whole community as ecologically marginal, I am turning to the land as a way of seeing, knowing, and being.[7] Indigenous Studies highlights the importance of kinship and reciprocal caregiving between humans and non-humans, such as land and water, viewed as sentient ancestors essential for maintaining good relations. Indigeneity encompasses connections to people, places, and practices rooted in native knowledge, reflecting Indigenous ways of being and understanding social, natural, and spiritual worlds.

Looking to maps of the partition along the 17th parallel, photos of Cái Sắn canals, and historical records as primary texts, my first intervention elaborates on how reading the land against these archival grains reveals the strange condition of refugeehood under the nation-state.[8] In the second half of the paper, I focus on my positionality as a Vietnamese American returning to Viet Nam, particularly the Mekong Delta, nearly fifty years after the US withdrawal from Southeast Asia, to reflect on what it means to sit with the land as a method and pedagogy.[9] These two interventions are not intended to homogenize the experiences of Bắc 54 with mine into a monolithic refugee experience; rather, the "refugee" serves as a tool to illustrate how the US and Viet Nam utilize the legal designation to further their political agendas beyond the temporality of the permanent war. Instead of what lessons we can learn from the semicentennial anniversary of the war(s) in Southeast Asia, I focus on what lessons we already have learned about relationship building by centering the land. I forward the framing of *Vietnamese settler refugeeism* to meditate on refugee temporality in relation to land and resettlement. In this work, I do not claim to engage with the "discovery narrative" embedded within academic discourse, which often over-theorizes the geopolitical economy and the jurisprudential parameters of refugees. Instead, I am invested in examining the relationship between the displaced population and the land that received them. As a Vietnamese American tracing my family history in Viet Nam, I am not only challenging the depiction of Vietnamese Americans as a model minority to justify conservative policies, but I am also critiquing US academic discourse that appropriates refugee subjectivity solely as a means to critique the US empire. By offering an alternative chronological origin of the refugee and exposing the ongoing state violence beyond migration legislation, I demonstrate that while Vietnamese people are war victims of Western colonialism and imperialism, they can also be active participants in the process of colonization. Thus, my reading of settler refugeeism in the Cái Sắn canals allows me to confront the discomforts, contradictions, and abundance that extend beyond settler epistemology.

Settling the New Nation: Bắc 54 and the Cold War Politics of Land Reform under Ngo Dinh Diem

After 1954, with the formal dismantling of former French Indochina, the US "replaced France," to borrow from Kathryn Statler, as a neocolonial power.[10] This manifested through modernization reforms that fought the proxy war via technocratic training and rural development tied to the national state authority of the newly created, US-backed South Viet Nam. Prime Minister (later President) Ngo Dinh Diem and his government had to demonstrate their ability to manage the country actively and effectively despite hesitation from the US government. Looking to the map of Viet Nam divided along the 17th parallel, I argue that this temporary military boundary actually tells a different story of refugee resettlement and land reform working together to normalize the truth of US Cold War proxy power (*see* Fig. 3).[11]

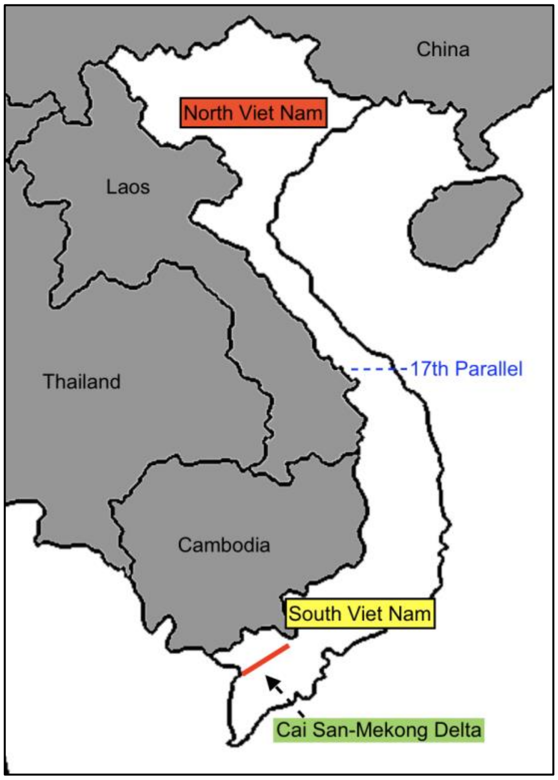

Figure 3. Map of Viet Nam Divided at the 17th Parallel. Source: Author's rendering.

Viet Nam is a multi-ethnic country with fifty-four ethnic groups, and the Kinh (also known as the Viet) people account for eighty-seven percent of the population.[12] Both Vietnamese and international scholars specializing on 1954 internal migration primarily focus on statecraft, religion, and war; they often fail to talk about the displacement and dispossession of ethnic minorities in both the mountainous highland and the Mekong Delta during resettlement. By placing migration studies and settler colonial studies in conversation with Vietnamese Studies, I demonstrate that the internal refugee is not an "object of knowledge" to be pathologized but an analytical category that is intrinsically embedded in local and global practices and ideologies of domination and exploitation.[13] Yến Lê Espiritu argues that the refugee figure should be read as a framework allowing scholars to question the US empire and its production of actual refugee peoples. Vietnamese refugees, she adds, allow us to look at the political consequences of ongoing global militarization caused by the US War in Viet Nam.[14] I am not necessarily forgoing the US interventionist role in Viet Nam to critique Vietnamese ethnonationalism, but rather recentering the internal refugees' relationship to the land to create new historiographies and paradigms that do not repurpose trauma or victimhood.

Immediately after the 1954 defeat of the French military, the Eisenhower administration justified US military intervention in South Viet Nam, along with Cambodia and Laos, through the rescue of Vietnamese refugees from communism.[15] The framing of "the refugee," however, is not commonly used by Vietnamese people. The word *người tị nạn*—refugee—signals a person who is forcibly displaced from their country due to duress, thus becoming stateless.[16] Most Vietnamese, however, saw themselves as *người di cư*—internal migrants—or a person who moved within their own country and retained their Vietnamese citizenship. From 1954 to 1956, the US allocated $93 million USD to refugee resettlement, approximately $4.40 per person.[17] This policy was to ensure a favorable outcome that would legitimize Diem's leadership as a Catholic within a predominantly Buddhist country.[18] Upon taking office, Diem established *Phủ Tổng ủy Di cư* (the Office of the General Commissioner for Refugees) to receive refugees and temporarily settle them in Sài Gòn and the surrounding areas. Nearly one million Catholics fled south in fear of religious and political persecution under communism, instantly doubling South Viet Nam's Catholic population.[19] The majority of evacuees exiting through Hà Nội and Hải Phòng transferred to *trạm tiếp cư* (reception stations) near the key points of disembarkation in Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn, and Vũng Tàu, living temporarily in pop-up tents before moving to permanent relocation sites, where they built homes and looked for long-term work.[20]

The internal refugee crisis was frequently characterized as a "state of emergency," framing it as a pressing issue that required resolution by South Viet Nam. Walter Benjamin contends that, for the oppressed, the state of emergency is not an anomaly but rather the norm, wherein violence, exploitation, and lawlessness are ongoing realities rather than fleeting disruptions.[21] Consequently, instead of seeing internal refugees and Viet Nam as passive objects justifying US global expansion under humanitarian pretenses, I forward a critique of Vietnamese Kinh dominance as part of a settler colonial logic. Viet Nam functioned as a settler nation long before the advent of Western extractive colonialism. Therefore, the US military interventions inadvertently contributed to the advancement of settler colonial technologies that strengthened Kinh ethnonationalism through the establishment of various government agencies. For example, Diem established *Phủ Tổng ủy Dinh điền* (the Office of the General Commissioner for Land Acquisition), which was responsible for surveying the condition of many areas in the South where agricultural land remained abandoned or underutilized, and for assigning migrant groups to those areas.[22] Beyond the densely populated regions of Sài Gòn and Bien Hoa, such as Xom Moi and Ho Nai, where residents lived in nonagricultural environments, most of the people sent to more remote locations like Xuan Loc (Long Khanh), Chuong Thien, Binh Tuy, Long Xuyen, and Rach Gia were tasked with land reclamation, crop cultivation, and primarily living off agriculture. Simultaneously, Diem also faced strong opposition from various paramilitary sects, including the Binh Xuyen force, the Hoa Hao, and even some loyalists to the former head of state, Emperor Bao Dai.[23] Many permanent relocation sites were strategically situated in communist strongholds, such as the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands, which were mainly populated by ethnic minorities whom Diem regarded as "uncivilized."[24] With a focus on border security and strengthening the budding South Viet Nam, Diem planned to establish additional Land Development Centers along the borders with Cambodia and Laos.[25] The main goal was to boost agricultural productivity; however, these land reforms also aimed to create a "human wall" to prevent communist infiltration, exemplified by Cái Sắn.[26]

While Diem advanced his resettlement program as an opportunity to give land to the landless, he also believed that the key to rural social transformation lay in the redistribution of *people* and not *land*. Thus, these intranational migrants were not just escaping a repressive communist regime in 1954, but were also potential laborers during South Viet Nam's turn to market liberalization, where individuals had free will to work in a soon-to-be unregulated market.[27] Here, the transfer of land ownership was not between Khmer and Kinh people, but rather the abandoned parcels of land previously owned by French landlords were now controlled by the South Vietnamese government, which was rented to predominantly Kinh migrants with the intention of eventually allowing them to own. Moving beyond the rubric of Marxist political economy, which focuses on labor exploitation and primitive accumulation, this form of alienation from the land focused on the right to own, govern, and protect private property. Recent conversations within settler colonial studies emphasize how a particular form of settler supremacy emerges from this site of exception that produces whiteness as property.[28] Within this settler logic, the proprietor has the right to have rights; they are the legal humans; they remain at the anthropocentric center to define the norms. This does not extend to all settlers, as Kinh people only enjoy certain privileges in proximity to whiteness and yet never fully become white.[29] As a result, settler supremacy in Viet Nam constructed a number of technologies: citizenship, private property, normative settler sexuality, and national borders to name a few.

Notably, during the French colonial occupation, the Cái Sắn canal was the site of several technological implementations by Western settlers. Plantation workers, derogatorily referred to as "coolies," were already forced to perform cheap labor with long hours in harsh conditions for meager wages or rice. Many were subjected to corporal punishment or died from malnutrition, dysentery, and malaria while working on the plantations. Vietnamese peasant farmers outside the plantations were required to perform thirty days of unpaid labor to build roads, dams, and other infrastructure under the *corvée* system introduced in 1901.[30] As a result, Diem's nation-building project benefited from the preexisting colonial labor structure created by French colonial logics and maintained by the US to advance his economic, security, and ideological objectives, juxtaposed against the communist land reform that took place in the north. Uniquely under Diem's vision, land reform should be implemented gradually under the vision of "middle peasantization," where the surplus population of farmers would work together to transform abandoned countryside land into productive land.[31] Modernizing the US Jeffersonian myth of autonomous farmers, Diem knew that redistribution of migrants on *empty* land was not enough to address the overpopulation problem, but rather providing the land and resources to promote *phát triển cộng đồng*, communal self-sufficiency. As the newly elected president of a fragile state, Diem rejected both liberal capitalism and communist-style collectivism to advance his philosophical backing of "Personalism." In reality, the US-supported Diem's efforts led to forced migrants and local residents providing much of the unfree labor, such as land clearance, digging canals, and building roads and public infrastructure, in exchange for land ownership. Moving beyond the dominant discourse of settler colonialism as a structure that is doing something *to* Indigenous people, my focus turns to the articulation of the internal refugees as a technology that is doing something *for* the settlers.

The most notable of these projects was the Cái Sắn Canal, one of the 169 resettlement centers that absorbed over fifty thousand Bắc Di Cư, ten percent of the migrants.[32] Named after a nearby stream, Cái Sắn is centrally located in Can Tho Province in the Mekong Delta, one hundred and twenty miles (195 km) southwest of Sài Gòn.[33] Formerly part of Cambodian territory, this flat, forest-covered swamp area was taken over by the Nguyen dynasty in 1715. In 1922, the French colonial government initiated the excavation of the Cái Sắn Canal, which stretched from the Hau River to the Rach Soi area in Kien Giang, and was completed in just a year and a half. Three years later, in 1926, the French constructed a road to connect Lo Te in Long Xuyen with Rach Soi in Kien Giang, positioning it parallel to the newly built canal. By 1931, this route had evolved into an essential arterial road known as Interprovincial Road 8.[34] Despite various agricultural reforms and advancements in the region, the onset of the First Indochina War led to many farmlands being left uncultivated, as both farmers and landlords abandoned the area.

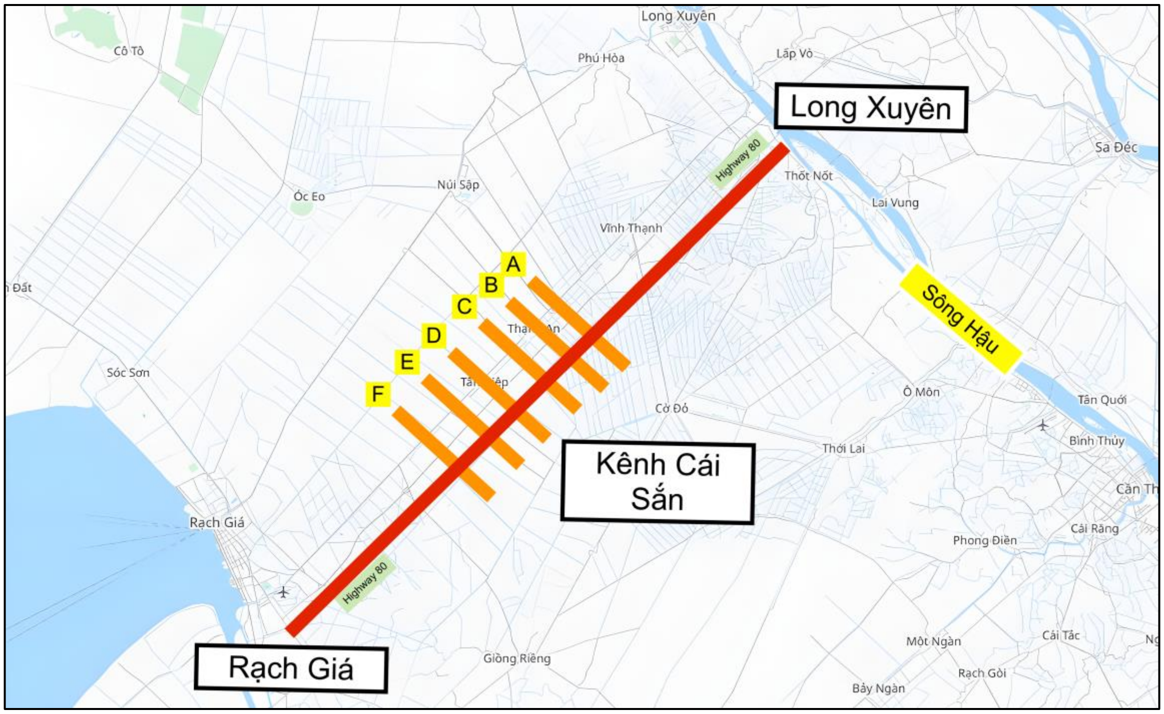
Long Xuyên
Cô Tô
Phú Hòa
Lấp Vò
Long Xuyên
Sa Đéc
Highway 80
Thốt Nốt
Lai Vung
Núi Sập
Óc Eo
Vĩnh Thạnh
A
B
C
D
E
F
Sông Hậu
Sóc Sơn
Cờ Đỏ
Ô Môn
Tân Quới
Bình Thủy
Thới Lai
Kênh Cái Sắn
Rạch Giá
Cái Răng
Phong Điền
Highway 80
Một Ngàn
Cái Tắc
Giồng Riềng
Rạch Giá
Rạch Gòi
Bảy Ngàn

Figure 4. Map of Kênh Cái Sắn. Source: Author's rendering. Original shapefile from openstreetmap.org.

Diem saw an opportunity to convert the region into an agricultural hotspot for the South and invested more than $23 million USD, a quarter of the US-funded amount, in this rural resettlement project. After settling surplus refugees in the Cái Sắn area, Diem's administration put them to work to build a system of canals perpendicular to the main canal, each about ten kilometers long and spaced roughly two kilometers apart, named with letters A, B, and C, and numbered from zero to ten.[35] The lettered canals belong to the Thot Not district, except for A and B, while the numbered canals are in Kien Tan district. In the direction of Long Xuyen to Rach Gia, within the Cái Sắn residential area in Kien Tan district, the right side of the inter-provincial road has canals B, A, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; the left side includes canals six to ten running in the opposite direction (*see* Fig. 4).[36] These canals support multiple functions, including transportation, flood control, and irrigation, ultimately facilitating rice farming.[37] As settler colonialism underscores the significance of land, Diem's establishment of the *Phủ Tổng ủy Hợp tác xã và Nông tín* (the Office of the General Committee for Cooperatives and Farmers' Credit) functioned as a settler technology to ensure the success of the land reform that eventually dispossessed the local Indigenous community due to inequitable access to the program. This office became responsible for providing loans to migrant farmers for the purchase of agricultural tools, seeds, fishing equipment, and boats. More specifically, the *Quốc gia Nông tín* (the National Agricultural Credit Department) operated under the Office of the General Committee for Cooperatives and Farmers' Credit during this time, serving as a financial institution that provided credit to recent migrants.[38]

To better understand the settler technology that transforms bodies and land into schisms, the Cái Sắn canal can be viewed as a vestibule that transforms Viet Nam from a colonized country into a settler nation, along with its so-called proper citizens, the Kinh people. Hortense Spillers theorizes Blackness as a "vestibular culture" that serves as an entry point into a large system of sociality and social relations.[39] This is not to collapse Black American experiences with internal Vietnamese migrants but rather to grasp how this man-made agricultural reform severs Indigenous people from the land. Rather than treating the land as a living and ever-changing entity, the colonial and technological development of the canal reduces it to a commodity. The 125-mile passage serves as a meditation space that not only allows me to witness the land but also to traverse time and space to comprehend the longer intercolonial violence beyond Western colonialism. Although the northern migrants and I have different relationships with the Cái Sắn canal, much of the settler technology persists across generations. This is not just the alienation between people and land but also the alienation of the land from its own sovereignty. Again, I argue that the articulation of the refugee is a settler technology that allowed South Viet Nam to partition the earth into "natural resources" that can be worked, owned, and now developed, resulting in land privation, privatization, and fungibility. The fungibility of Indigenous people and land becomes most apparent when we see how both refugees and land are supposed to be protected but are instead exploited.

Historical records and personal accounts often celebrate the success of the Cái Sắn Project, which overlooks the erasure of Indigenous ethnic minorities during the resettlement.[40] In fact, much of the evidence suggests that the South Vietnamese government incorporated liberal tenets, including individualism, civil progress, and liberal multiculturalism, as well as the concept of land as private property, which contributed to the ethnic tension within the region.[41] In contrast to capitalism, South Viet Nam does not seek to overaccumulate land for its productive potential. Instead, they recognize the fungibility of local Indigenous communities and refugees, viewing them as interchangeable, exchangeable, extractable, and disposable. Moving beyond the idea of settlers and natives as opposing "identities," we see that these are actually different states of being: settlers are governed by laws and technocratic methods of order and control, while natives are seen as the exception that can be discarded or killed. However, in the case of internal refugees and Khmer Krom, these bodies are exchangeable by other ethnic groups, machines, and even legal apparatus to advance South Viet Nam's mission. Through financial and legal ordinances backed by US officials, Diem's rural agrarian reform program ultimately suppressed the Khmer Krom and their history by treating land as an abandoned space to be cultivated and commodified. My land reading method focuses on how land influences ethnic identity and sovereignty between Cambodia and Viet Nam, linking this to precolonial history, not just topography.

Khmer-Kinh Vietnamese Ethnic Relations

A simple question is still being asked today: Why do many Cambodians and Vietnamese dislike each other so much? Early myths dating back to the 1800s told the tale of hostility between the Kinh and Khmer people, accusing each other of barbarism. Historically, the Mekong Delta's *virgin* land had only a few Khmer Krom living in scattered villages beyond the control of any state. Due to its unique location, situated between land and sea, the Mekong Delta remained uninhabitable for most land-based empires because the rivers are full of salt water, and the groundwater is too acidic to drink.[42] The region is characterized by marshes, crisscrossed rivers, and eventually canals, creating a distinctive landscape that differs from the port, coastal, and sea-oriented cities, as well as littoral societies.[43] For the Vietnamese, the Khmer Krom were *primitive* strangers, "dark-skinned and scantily clothed,"[44] living in isolated regions, who were often pejoratively referred to as *người mọi* (savages) or *người Miên* (Cao Miên—an older name for Cambodia). Predating European racial ideologies, the vocabulary of ethnicity did not exist in Viet Nam or Southeast Asia; instead, that grammar was built on tributary systems that incorporated the periphery and peoples through polity, status, and civilization.[45] Over time, with the arrival of new migrants, such as the Chinese, Vietnamese, and French, the region underwent significant social and ecological changes that later impacted the 1954 rural resettlement.

As the Viet Nam nation-building project gathered momentum, Diem faced a new set of issues of uniting ethnic groups (such as the highlanders, Cham, Khmer, and Chinese) to fight under a single cause. The Sai Gon government agencies had to address the ethnic minority issue for the first time. Particularly, Khmer Krom saw the Vietnamese as foreign invaders in the wake of Diem's forced assimilation policy to resettle northern migrants in the Mekong Delta while excluding them from owning their own land. In 1954, cultural anthropologist Gerald Hickey visited the Mekong Delta and noted that "the teacher spoke Khmer to pupils who were learning Vietnamese as a second language." The hostility increased when Diem abolished the use of the Khmer language and did away with Khmer schools, leading many to move to Cambodia.[46] Those who stayed in Viet Nam sent their children to study in Phnom Penh. However, racial tensions today continue to rise as many Khmers can speak and read Vietnamese while being unable to read Khmer, which leads to the questioning of their authenticity. Similarly, Diem enforced the same assimilationist policies on ethnic Chinese in Cho Lon, Sai Gon, which later heightened ethnic tension in the city that resulted in the mass expulsion of ethnically Chinese Vietnamese.[47]

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> Upon reaching the end of the 125-mile stretch, I arrived in Rach Gia, a lively coastal city lined with local bars and coffee shops popular among foreign developers. A red ferry with a prominent sign caught my eye, advertising a quick and affordable sea trip to Phu Quoc in under three hours. Operated exclusively by Thanh Thoi Limited Liability Company, this state-of-the-art ferry runs three daily trips at approximately twenty-three nautical miles per hour, ensuring a comfortable journey for travelers. I pulled into the port parking lot to find workers and foreign tourists crowding the ticket counters, with cars and motorbikes lining up to board the ferry. Notably, similar to the Cái Sắn canal, Phu Quoc remains a contested territory between Viet Nam and Cambodia, both claiming ownership of the island. Known in Khmer as Koh Tral, Phu Quoc is designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and is Viet Nam's largest island, famous for its pristine beaches, vibrant tourist attractions, and high-quality fish sauce, a major export. Its rich history includes the infamous Coconut Prison, which held over 400,000 inmates, and its role as a refuge for the Nguyen Lords during the Tay Son Rebellion (1771–1802). The stark contrast between rice paddy fields and the bustling ferry port erases any remnants of colonial occupation, Khmer history, or even traces of refugee resettlement. In this 125-mile stretch, the Cái Sắn canals serve as the vestibule between the old world and new developments that are not only transforming history but also hiding the future of globalization (*see* Fig. 5). Local Khmer residents described Vietnamese residents as "boat people" who have increasingly taken over

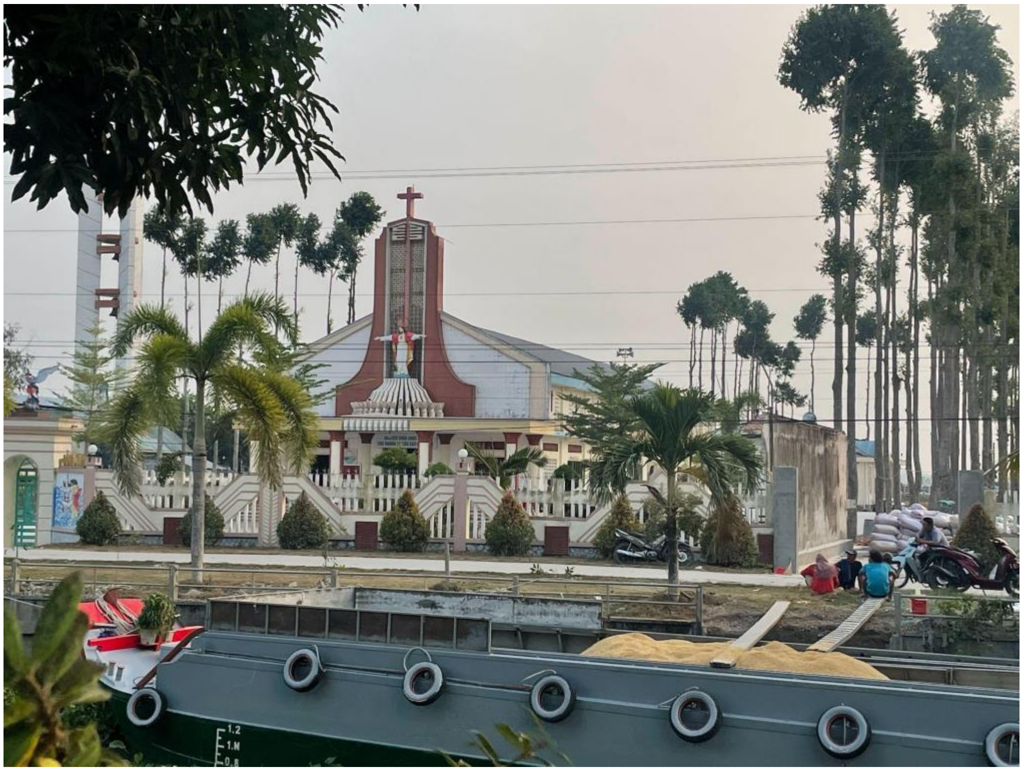

Figure 5. Cái Sắn canal with a Catholic church in the background and a boat transporting harvested rice, 2024. Author's photo.

the land after the French occupation and the rise of the Republic. What was once a dense forest with unusable red and sour water, remarked by a Khmer elder, is now transformed by the canals bringing fresh water from the Mekong River. However, with rapid development, the Khmer-Kinh population ratio has shifted, inverting from a time when there were only a few Vietnamese for every hundred Khmers to the opposite. Strangers to their own land, Khmer Krom are seen as outsiders to both Viet Nam and Cambodia.

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Vietnamese Settler Refugeeism: Beyond Binaries

I forward the framing of *Vietnamese settler refugeeism* to critically examine Viet Nam's transition into a settler state, viewing Viet Nam nation-states and northern migrants as active agents aware of and acting on ideologies, challenging the US humanitarian narrative that supported intranational refugee migration. Settler colonialism differs from other types of colonialism and imperialism, which aim to extract resources from colonies by using local or imported labor, often involving indentured or slave labor.

Settler colonial nations, on the other hand, aim to eliminate Indigenous populations to claim land for the nation and its settlers.[48] Focusing on the global context, Eiichiro Azuma posits that Japanese settler colonialism is distinct from Anglophone examples by incorporating both land domination and the exploitation of indigenous labor. This "idiosyncratic settler colonialism" emerged from Japan's relatively "lateness" in imperial expansion and requires a cross-border perspective for comprehensive understanding.[49] My work as a Vietnamese American scholar in Viet Nam then complicates the Indigenous and settler binary by examining the internal Vietnamese refugees who straddle both categories. Answering the question of whether Vietnamese refugees can be settlers, we must move beyond the US borders to think about the refugees' preexisting relationship to the land. Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi introduces the framing of "refugee settler condition" that addresses the refugees' complicated positionality in relation to Indigenous peoples when they resettle in settler colonial states, such as the US and other Western receiving countries.[50] Expanding the refugee's geotemporal parameter, Juliana Hu Pegues's concept of "space-time colonialism" emphasizes analyzing the messy, overlapping spaces and times of imperial conquest and colonial governance.[51] Unlike the US, where settler history is marred by chattel slavery and Indigenous dispossession, internal Vietnamese refugees cannot be simply categorized within the settler-native binary, as these internal migrants are not foreigners to the region nor do they aim to eliminate the natives.[52] And yet, they still rely on settler technologies that alienate and transform land into property during the reunification period.[53] These technologies include infrastructure development and legal frameworks that facilitate the occupation and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Thus, the pseudo-legal articulation of the refugee, in Viet Nam and later in the US, cannot and should not be read as ahistorical or exceptional.

Upon closer examination, the 1954 division of Viet Nam reifies the Kinh ethnic group as legitimate citizens advocating for national reunification, bolstering Vietnamese ethnonationalist claims to ownership over the land. Historical narratives often portray the Kinh as "pioneer" settlers who fled oppression in the North and Central regions to discover the previously ungoverned land in Nam Bo (southern Viet Nam) more than three hundred years ago.[54] Phillip Taylor suggests that interethnic conflicts are not unprecedented but are rooted in crises or threats to the nation-state project.[55] Therefore, not only did the refugees not cross international borders, but this intranational migration is part of a longer history of expansionism.

The US and Viet Nam built upon each other's imperial schemas to reimagine different sets of settler crises and borders, moving these bodies intranationally as modern-day land grabs. To justify its nation-building projects in other parts of the world, the US needed a successful outcome in Southeast Asia after many failed attempts to suppress communism elsewhere. The Truman administration openly assisted France with $2.7 billion from 1950 to 1954 to fund approximately eighty percent of the war effort of reoccupying Viet Nam. However, as liberal capitalism and eastern communism were taking center stage in the Cold War theater, Kathryn Statler explains how the Franco-American alliance enabled the US to pursue a unilateral and ultimately imperialist policy in Viet Nam to score against both communism and colonialism.[56] Subsequently, the US fabricated the refugee crisis episode following the 1954 Geneva Accords division to prevent another Korea, which had concluded a year earlier. Both Viet Nam and the Geneva Accords, however, did not recognize northern émigrés to be refugees because they were not technically leaving their country of origin.[57] Instead of restricting critique of settler colonialism solely to land and labor exploitation, the articulation of the refugees should also be interpreted as part of the settler colonial technology that facilitates the history of theft and erasure. The emphasis on the term "refugees" over alternatives such as "migrants," "evacuees," or "exiles" serves as a diplomatic tool that reveals the US's strategy to depict North Viet Nam as an unstable state incapable of caring for its people. This functions as settler technology, with the US reworking French colonial extraction in Viet Nam through global development and capitalism, without having to eliminate the local population. These are still Vietnamese citizens who are forced to identify as refugees within their own country in order to access humanitarian aid. Reframing the internally displaced population as *US refugees in Viet Nam* not only emphasizes US expansionist logic but also exposes how Viet Nam imagines nationalism, land, and borders.

Sitting With the Land as Pedagogy

As a final section of this essay, my fieldnotes and fleeting memories of the Mekong Delta are not meant to be expanded into a grand theory that makes sense of the violence that Vietnamese refugees endured. Rather, I am building on Leanne Simpson's "Land as Pedagogy" to think about how "[m]eaning … is derived not through content or data, or even theory in a western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference."[58] As academics, we obsess over our theoretical genealogy not only to trace our epistemological lineage but also to build relationships with one another. However, how can we theorize about something that was never intended to include us in the conversation? Mimi Thi Nguyen, a transnational feminist, adds that even when the US lost the wars, it was still able to expand its empire through rescuing the communist defector refugees.[59] As a global ethnic studies scholar grounded in Western epistemology, I find myself in a precarious position within academia, where I often get theorized as part of the margins. Michael Latham posits that modernization became a tool of the Cold War, especially during the Kennedy administration, enabling academics to participate in imperialist expansionism.[60]

Similar to the internal migrants who resettled along the Cái Sắn canals after 1954, my positionality as a Kinh person who is an actual Vietnamese refugee in the US also signifies a certain historical and cultural privilege that is often overlooked. Due to the chaotic conclusion of the wars in 1975, the majority of the postwar refugees were

Kinh people who benefited from state recognition and demographic prominence. I recognize the complex positionality of my work on the Kinh people, as a Kinh person. While I cannot speak or write for Indigenous ethnic minorities in Viet Nam, particularly Khmer Krom, my interventions directly challenge the privilege and power imbalances within Vietnamese refugee historiography. The US did not codify the refugees to recuperate the wars in Southeast Asia; rather, the impulsive articulation of the refugee in Viet Nam escalated the wars. Paradoxically, as the wars displaced my family, my return to Viet Nam in order to attempt access to Vietnamese language and history—especially oral history—is not only a form of self-determination and cultural preservation but also a way to process and heal intergenerational trauma. Additionally, accessing the land in Viet Nam is also an extension of relationship building and understanding my complex, often contradictory history as a diasporic Vietnamese American, whose family resettled in the Mekong Delta over four centuries ago. Today, as the current US administration targets Southeast Asian refugees for deportation, disaggregated data show that Indigenous ethnic minorities experience even greater discrimination. The calamities that beset us are not exceptional; rather, these emergencies and crises are constant facts of life in the US and Viet Nam that target marginalized communities. Vietnamese settler refugeeism provides an entreé to these vexed and messy relationships, extending beyond the US permanent war paradigm and functioning as both a preexisting condition and an ongoing phenomenon. By returning to the land, I demonstrate that these acts of violent expulsion are part of a longer chronology beyond the US empire, stemming back to the interregional violence in the region.

As a child, my mother took my brother and me to Cau Khe every summer to visit my Ong Ngoai on his farm. Our journey lasted nearly six hours by bus, ferry, and boat before reaching a branch of the Mekong River, where we were greeted by rows of coconut trees, mangroves, and sugar palm trees along the riverbank to prevent landslides and erosion. The family would share tall tales about how neighbors across the river allegedly paid a witchdoctor to cast spells on our shore, causing the land to erode on our side while expanding theirs. From an early age, I learned that land and water are not fixed but commodities to be protected. The more land you have, the more protection you have from falling into the river. Years later, after migrating to the US, rumors arose that the Mekong River might one day dry up due to upstream hydropower dams in neighboring countries. Initially, I thought these folklores were just cautionary tales about the river's ebb and flow, scaling from my family's experiences to those of the nation-building project. Yet, these seemingly small stories reveal something more profound: the Mekong River has been the region's lifeblood long before my family's resettlement, and before Viet Nam became a nation.

By sitting with the land in Viet Nam, I am learning how the land has always resisted and refused to be incorporated into anyone's settler logic. Therefore, settler technology can also be resisted. For instance, despite the rapid expansion of high dike systems that have tripled rice cultivation in the upper Mekong Delta, we are witnessing a rise in flooding and natural disasters. Additionally, with the illegal export of sand for a profitable margin, we are seeing large-scale land erosion that is reshaping the daily lives of residents in the Mekong Delta (*see* Fig. 6). While it is tempting to claim that I resisted Western supremacy by sitting, idling, and resting with the land, lived reality shows that neither Viet Nam nor the land need me to write them into existence. My status as a refugee fifty years after the conclusion of one permanent war and at the onset of other multivariant warfare does not change anything. Rather, my existence is a reminder to both the US empire and the Viet Nam ethnonationalist state that we can exist in contradiction and resistance.

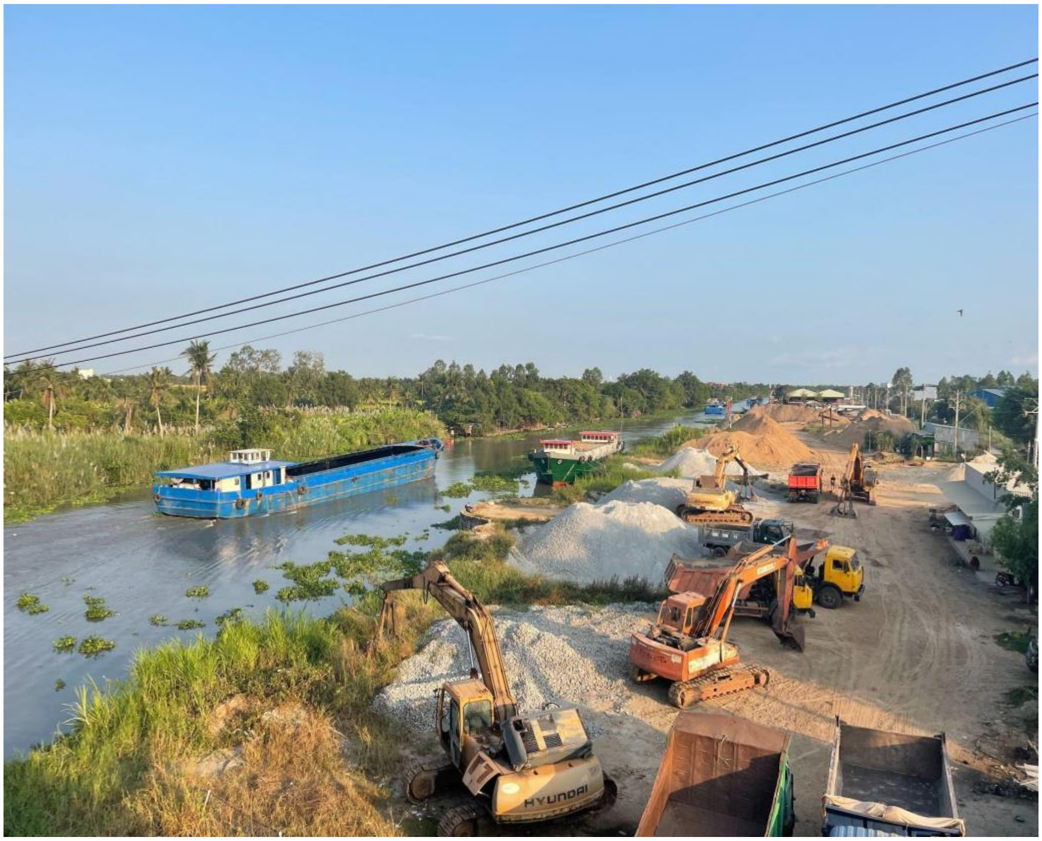

Figure 6. Sand field along the Mekong Delta, 2024. Author's photo.

*

I returned to the winding roads, hugging the manmade canal, hoping to find an answer. I did not know what the question was, but I knew that if I kept riding my motorcycle, I would eventually find *it*. As I rode deeper into the unmarked paths, I was lulled by the bells and the chants echoing from wartime loudspeakers that once broadcast political agendas and local radio programs. I pulled over and sat down at what seemed like someone's house along the canal, displaying four red plastic chairs and a flimsy plastic table. A woman walked out of the house and offered me coffee and a cold glass of diluted iced tea (*see* Fig. 7). As she watched me fumble with the assortment of colorful bills, she shot a quick smirk and brushed her hands to indicate it was difficult for her to break $500,000 *đồng* for a $20,000 *đồng* drink. We talked for nearly an hour, and she mentioned that her relatives are also from the big city, Can Tho, located an hour northeast. I was too afraid to ask her about her family history or the local refugees who might have resettled in the area. But as boat after boat passed us on the canal, she explained that these boats were carrying harvested rice or sand to be sold. We never actually discussed land or the crops, except for how hard it is to labor out in the field day after day, praying for a good harvest from season to season. As I left, I realized I might have been her first customer of the day, or a random stranger she welcomed into her house as part of southern hospitality. This moment did not contribute to my research in the way that academics would expect their hypotheses to be answered. Instead, our interactions allowed me to reflect on land and kinship formation as a Vietnamese American stumbling around in the countryside of Viet Nam. While colonial and imperial geopolitical agendas were mapped onto human lives over the decades and centuries, people continue to create their own ecosystems to survive and thrive.

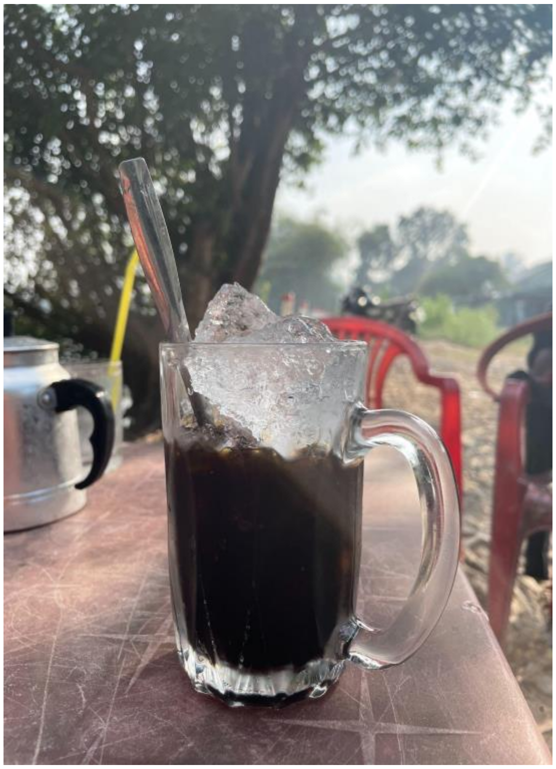

Figure 7. Vietnamese black coffee in front of the vendor's house, 2024. Author's photo.

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Conclusion

The 1954 internal migration illustrates how the formalization of the refugee concept created the political and social conditions that led to the subsequent US War in Viet Nam. The internally displaced Vietnamese and the history of the land act as a counternarrative to the state-sanctioned historiography in the -I placed the refugees beyond US-defined borders in Viet Nam, complicating the parameters and mechanisms of the US Empire. By framing the war as an ethnocentric nationalist struggle between the Kinh people, I shift the analysis of Viet Nam and its refugees beyond just war atrocities and victimhood, viewing it instead as part of an ongoing imperial effort. Furthermore, I expand the conversations on refugees beyond the framing of always already transnational objects to examine the intranational level, which has the potential to delegitimize state power.

Connecting this historical event to the current moment, we are witnessing a large number of Khmers and Montagnards (Indigenous highlanders in Viet Nam) facing deportation from the US. The framing of refugeeism was never intended to save these war victims, but rather, the precarity of these populations exposed the shortcomings of the US migration legislation. Here, the prison-to-deportation pipeline is very much a lived reality of these marginalized refugees, as their communities continue to face structural oppression through policies established long before they arrived in the US. Today, over 2.7 million Southeast Asian Americans live in the country, with about sixteen thousand people facing final orders of deportation. Many of these cases involve individuals who came to the US as children, and more than thirteen thousand deportation orders are based on old criminal records. Significantly, Indigenous ethnic minorities are at higher risk of being targeted due to their socioeconomic status, resettlement history, and incarceration records. The framing of the refugee is not meant to protect but rather shield the workings of empire, militarism, and global expansion. Engaging with Global Indigeneity reveals the complexities inherent in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly in its reinforcement of hierarchical structures that continue to marginalize unrecognized indigenous groups. The ongoing struggles of the Khmer Krom highlight systemic discrimination and the inadequacies of the declaration, as they continue to be denied access to essential resources and education in their own language. Furthermore, the recent sighting of South Vietnamese nationalists at the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol highlights the complex nature of Vietnamese experiences within the larger story of refugee politics, showing the dual roles, they play as both victims of US imperialism and participants in settler colonial logics. By examining these intricacies, my work invites critical reflection on the enmeshed histories of colonialism and imperialism that shape our contemporary lives, rather than providing simplistic and misleading resolutions.

Notes

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[1] Article 14(d) of the Geneva Accords allowed people to move freely north-south or south-north during the prescribed transmigration period. The International Control Commission (ICC) was responsible for monitoring, supervising, and enforcing this free movement (Geneva Accords, *Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet Nam*, July 20, 1954; Articles 34–36; here, see Article 14[d]).

[2] I will also interchangeably refer to the northern migrants as "Bắc 54," "Bắc di cư," "internal migrants," "intranational refugee," "émigrés," and "refugees."

[3] Viet Nam is not traditionally a capitalist country but rather built on feudalism. After 1945, especially after the French defeat in 1954, Vietnamese communism emphasizes the importance of not only anticolonial but also anticapitalist and antifeudal efforts. See Colin Long, "Feudalism in the Service of the Revolution: Reclaiming Heritage in Hue," *Critical Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (2003): 541.

[4] In an attempt to move away from positive investments in land, I am interested in thinking about what settler colonialism looks like outside of the empire and beyond the formation of the nation-state, where intranation refugees do not fit into the native-settler binary. See Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino, "Slavery Is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,'" *Antipode* 52, no. 3 (2020): 764–82.

[5] On March 17, 1975, President Ford signed the Refugee Act of 1975, which allowed for the evacuation and relocation of Southern Vietnamese refugees to the US, prematurely establishing the US as a leader in refugee protection.

[6] Nguyen Vo Thu Huong, *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End* (University of California Press, 2024), 92.

[7] See the use of grounded normativity by Glen Coulthard in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting The Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); see also Vicente Diaz, "Expanding the Groundwork for Research in the Revitalization and Sustainability of Micronesian Seafaring" in *Proceedings of the International Conference: "Perspectives of Research for Intangible Cultural Heritage Towards a Sustainable Society,"* International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (2019); and Kyle Whyte, "What Do Indigenous Knowledges Do for Indigenous Peoples," in *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[8] Jonathan X. Lee discusses the importance of doing work as a Chinese Cambodian American in relation to Vietnamese identity, see Jonathan X. Lee, "Becoming Chinese Cambodian American," *History and Perspective, The Journal of the Chinese Historical Society of America* (2020): 41–46. Also see Vinh Nguyen's emphasis on personal experiences with theoretical intervention in "Mẹ-Search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance," *Life Writing* 12, no. 4 (2014): 467–77.

[9] For method see Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010); and for pedagogy, see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014), https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22170

[10] Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Kentucky University Press, 2007).

[11] This is a redrawn map of Viet Nam divided at the 17th parallel.

[12] While race and ethnicity in the US are critical sociopolitical categories that are used to examine the power imbalance throughout the nation's history, Viet Nam does not operate under the same ideological formations and praxis. Shawn McHale states that precolonial Viet Nam relies on "geographies of identity"—polity, status, and civilization to determine socio-relations between different "ethnic" groups. With the arrival of the French in Indochina, ethnicity and race were restructured to reflect the eugenic hierarchy that centered whiteness at the core of civility. By looking at Viet Nam's 1954 ethnic groups, I am not prioritizing global white supremacist logic, but rather, this localized lens allows me to think through social relations within Viet Nam in juxtaposition with a long history of intercolonialism and interimperialism. See Sean McHale, "Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757–1954," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 367–90.

[13] Leading literature that informs and is in critical refugee studies: Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile* (Faber and Faber, 1994); Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998); Yến Lê

Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (*University of California Press, 2014*); Liisa Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495–523. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155947; Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond State of Emergency* (Routledge, 2013); and Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012); and others.

[14] See Espiritu, *Body Counts*.

[15] The Geneva Agreement states, "any civilians residing in a district controlled by one party who wish to go and live in the zone assigned to the other party shall be permitted and helped to do so by the authorities in that district" (Geneva Accords, Article 14[d]).

[16] According to the legal definition outlined by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, a refugee must live outside of their country of origin and are unable or unwilling to go back due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution and are thus stateless.

[17] Leland Barrows, "Statement before Vietnam's Committee on Foreign Aid," June 14, 1956, Box 649, Folder 19, Michigan State University Group, Vietnam Project Papers, East Lansing, Michigan.

[18] Jessica Elkind, "The Virgin Mary is Going South": Refugee Resettlement in South Vietnam, 1954–1956," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 5 (2014): 987–1016.

[19] Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư Ty Nạn (PTUDCTN) [Commissioner for Refugees to President's Office] to Phủ Tổng Thống (PTT), File 343, Folder 4041, Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa (PTTĐNCH) [Office of the President of the First Republic], Vietnam National Archives II, Hồ Chí Minh City (VNA-II).

[20] PTUDCTN to PTT, July 15, 1955, File 343, Folder 4041, PTTĐNCH, VNA-II.

[21] Walter Beniamin, "Thesis 8: A Real State of Emergency," in "On the Concept of History," trans. H. Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Volume 4: 1938–1940, Harvard University Press, 2003).

[22] Diem implemented Ordinance 57, a land reform law, to redistribute land that was modeled after earlier Agrarian Reform programs in Japan and Taiwan. See David Wurfel, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," *Far Eastern Survey* 26, no. 6 (1957): 81–92, https://doi.org/10.2307/3024364

[23] Kevin Li discusses the rise of Binh Xuyen as political actors rather than crime lords in Kevin Li, "Partisan to Sovereign: The Making of the Bình Xuyên in Southern Vietnam, 1945–1948," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, nos. 3–4 (2016): 140–87.

[24] Gerald Cannon Hickey writes in detail about the resettlement in the highlands. See Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954–1976* (Yale University Press, 1982), 18.

[25] Bắc di cư were relocated to the highland areas of Đà Lạt, Pleiku, and Buôn Ma Thuột, in addition to Cái Sắn and other regions the Mekong Delta. See, PTUDCTN to PTT, July 15, 1955, File 343, Folder 4041, PTTĐNCH, VNA-II.

[26] Jean Lacouture suggested that Diem strategically placed settlements of loyalists around Sai Gon to protect himself from communists and potential enemies within the RVN. See Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Joel Carmichael (Secker and Warburg, 1966), 105.

[27] Diem's government wanted to resettle migrants to areas suited for their occupation, such as farmers to agricultural regions. See PTUDCTN, Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sửtại Việt Nam (Sài Gòn: PTUDCTN), 213.

[28] See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Temple University Press, 2006); and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[29] The French "civilizing mission" allows Vietnamese people to obtain French citizenship as a way to control the population. See Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900–1931* (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 219.

[30] Martin Thomas explores the triangular relationship between business, bureaucracy, and the colonial police force in Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[31] Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 161.

[32] See Minister for Land Reform to PTUDCTN, December 10, 1955, File 375, Folder 4405, PTTĐNCH, VNA-II. Wolf Ladejinsky played a key role setting up the land reform and oversaw the implementation, see Wolf Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, ed. Louis J. Walinsky (Oxford University Press, 1979), 305.

[33] Report no. 1860-DTCC/55/VP, "Plan de mise en culture d'une zone de 70,000 Ha. de terre," 25 Nov 1955, folder 21467, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.

[34] David Biggs, "Canals in the Mekong Delta: A Historical Overview from 200 C.E. to the Present," in *Water Encyclopedia*, ed. J. H. Lehr and J. Keeley, 4.

[35] Biggs, "Canals in the Mekong Delta," 4; Secretariat of State for the Republic of Vietnam (SSRVN), *Cai San: The Dramatic Story of Resettlement and Land Reform in the "Ricebowl" of the Republic of Vietnam* (Sài Gòn: Secretariat of State for the Republic of Vietnam, 1957), 8; Minister for Land Reform to PTUDCTN, December 10, 1955, File 375, Folder 4405, PTTĐNCH, VNA-II.

[36] Map outline is taken from openstreetmap.org and redrawn.

[37] SSRVN, *Cai San: The Dramatic Story*, 9.

[38] SSRVN, *Cai San: The Dramatic Story*, 19.

[39] See Hortense Spiller, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. Ashon Crawley built on Spiller to theorize about the practices of 'blackqueer' sociality within the vestibule, see Crawley, "Held in the Vestibule," *Modern Believing* 60, no. 1 (2019): 49–64.

[40] Robert Estabrook, "Vietnam's Gone Far 'From Scratch,'" *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1957; Richard W Lindholm, ed., *Vietnam: The First Five Years* (Michigan State University, 1959); Robert Alden, "535 Refugees in South Vietnam Turn the Earth in Vital Notes to Chapter 5 Project; They Dig Canal that not only Will Give Them a New Life, But also Will Enable Settlement of Foes to Red Penetration," *New York Times*, February 9, 1956, A2 (Alden misprinted 535 *refugees* instead of 535 families with the approximation of thirty-seven hundred refugees).

[41] The government's effort to reallocate refugees by occupation faced many issues. For instance, relocating ethnic Nung people to Phan Ri for salt harvesting failed due to their lack of experience with the sea and salt work. See "Vấn đề định cư cho đồng bào tị nạn đã tiến đến đâu?" *Việt Tấn Xã*, December 2, 1954.

[42] See David Biggs's *Quagmire Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (University of Washington Press, 2012).

[43] Tana Li and Charles Wheeler discussed about the "littoral society" and Winichakul talked about the plains-oriented empires. Tana Li, "The Water Frontier: An Introduction." In *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750–1880* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 1–17; Charles Wheeler, "Re-Thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2006): 123–53; and Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

[44] Gerald Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Texas Tech University Press, 2002), 6.

[45] Shawn McHale, "Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations."

[46] When the Accords were signed in 1954, a white cultural anthropologist visited the Mekong Delta and noted that "the teacher spoke Khmer to pupils who were learning Vietnamese as a second language." Gerald Hickey talks about Diem's desire to civilize ethnic minorities as part of the state project. See Hickey, *Window on a War*, 29.

[47] The anti-Chinese sentiment continued long after the war that resulted in subsequent mass migration in the 1980s, known as the second wave migration. See Lee, "Becoming Chinese Cambodian American," 43.

[48] Settler colonialism refers to when colonizers settle permanently with the goal of completely controlling Indigenous lands and ways of life. Unlike other types of colonialism that may focus on extracting resources for profit, settler colonialism involves establishing long-term settlements on land, water, and air, leading to claims of "settler sovereignty" over these territories. This ongoing process of colonization is characterized by daily violence and is better understood as a structure rather than an event. See Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240; Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University ,Press, 2016); Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (First Peoples: New Directions Indigenous, University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas* (Temple University, 2019).

[49] As part of a recent trend in the English-language historiography of settler colonialism Eiichiro Azuma takes a transborder perspective that puts Japan more fully into the global study of settler colonialism. See Eiichiro Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in The Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire* (University of California Press, 2019), 6–7.

[50] See Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement* (University of California, 2022)

[51] Juliana Hu Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 13–14.

[52] Jodi Byrd introduces "arrivant" for racialized and migrant groups like Black, Asian American, and Hispanic people arriving on colonized land. Iyko Day expands settler colonialism beyond a binary to include settler, Native, and alien populations. See Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*; and Day, *Alien Capital.*

[53] Advancements in military technology were apparent due to wars in Southeast Asia; however, I want to highlight settler colonialism technology as a form of soft power that further both the US empire and Vietnamese expansionism.

[54] Vietnamese nationalists use the *nam tiến* narrative to justify southern conquest and migration as a national destiny that created an enduring identity myth, ensuring the country's homogeneity. See Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, eds. *Viêt Nam: Borderless Histories* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); and Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty* (NUS Press, 2014), 259.

[55] See Philip Taylor, "Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008): 3–43.

[56] Statler, *Replacing France*, 85–99.

[57] The 1951 Refugee Convention clearly states that refugees must leave their country of origin before seeking asylum and potentially gaining refugee status, yet internal migrants never left their country. Due to this lack of recognition, the UN also did not provide assistance or support for the internal migrants because they do not qualify as refugees due to the fact they never left their country, see Louis Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Viet-Nam, 1954–1975,* (Bloomsbury Press, 1988), xvii.

[58] See Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 11

[59] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012).

[60] Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

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