

## BURNING DOWN THE LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE: ASIAN PIONEERS IN CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICA

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*The Kappa Child* (2001) by Japanese Canadian author Hiromi Goto and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007) by Vietnamese American Bich Minh Nguyen portray narratives of Asian girls growing up in North America in the pre-multiculturalism decades of the 70s and 80s, when *ethnic* was not a fashionable term and assimilation into mainstream white culture was any girl's most wanted desire. In both literary texts, the girl narrators are fascinated by American author Laura Ingalls Wilder's narrative of continuous displacement and re-settlement, *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), and they both become equally disillusioned by the racial and ethnic gaps that make it impossible for them to become true Laura Ingalls in their respective environments. This article attempts to assess the influence of this classic pioneer narrative of (internal) migration on the perception of racialization of these two Asian migrants to North America, on their own critical evaluation of the racism in Ingalls Wilder's texts and on the consequent process of construction of racialized subjectivities by Goto's and Nguyen's narrators.

Keywords: Diaspora; racialization; gender; childhood; Asian American literature; Laura Ingalls

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### **INCENDIO EN LA CASA DE LA PRADERA: PIONERAS ASIÁTICAS EN LA NORTEAMÉRICA CONTEMPORÁNEA**

The *Kappa Child* (2001), de la autora canadiense de origen japonés Hiromi Goto y *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007), de la autora de origen vietnamita Bich Minh Nguyen, ofrecen narrativas de infancia de niñas asiáticas que crecen en Norteamérica en las décadas pre-multiculturales de los años 70 y 80, cuando la palabra étnico no estaba aún de moda y la asimilación a la cultura blanca dominante era el mayor deseo de cualquier niña. En ambos textos literarios, las narradoras están fascinadas por la historia de continuo desplazamiento y reemplazamiento de *La casa de la pradera*, de la autora estadounidense Laura Ingalls Wilder (1935), y ambas se sumen en la misma desilusión debido a la distancia racial y étnica que hace imposible que ellas se conviertan en auténticas Lauras en sus respectivos contextos. Este artículo intenta evaluar la influencia de esta narrativa clásica de migración pionera (interna) en la percepción de su racialización por parte de dos inmigrantes asiáticas en Norteamérica, su propia valoración crítica del racismo en los textos de Ingalls Wilder y el consecuente proceso de construcción de las subjetividades racializadas de las narradoras de Goto y Nguyen.

Palabras clave: Diáspora; racialización; género; infancia; literatura asiática norteamericana; Laura Ingalls

## 1. Introduction

*The Kappa Child* (2001), by Japanese Canadian author Hiromi Goto, has been widely read as a remarkable piece of speculative fiction, fantasy or science fiction, and it obtained the James Triptree Jr. Award, “an annual literary prize for science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender” (James Triptree Jr. Award website). Vietnamese American Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* (2007), on the other hand, is subtitled *A Memoir*, and was distinguished with the PEN/Jerard Fund Award that “honors a work in progress of general nonfiction” (Jerard Fund Award, online). Leaving aside the ‘fact or fiction’, ‘fantasy or reality’ divisions that would traditionally catalogue these books onto separate generic shelves, I will be considering here both texts as the truthful fictionalized narratives of childhood of two Asian girls growing up in North America who share, among other things, an interest in food and a passion for Laura Ingalls, the popular protagonist of the famous *Little House* series. For both of them Laura is, at a given moment in their lives, a pioneer heroine and inspiring role model who gradually becomes a source of unease and anxiety. In this article I will attempt to assess the influence of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s classic narrative of migration and settlement on these two Asian girls in North America, examining their perception of the racialization of the characters in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), their critical evaluation of the gender and racial flaws in that text, and the subsequent process of construction of their own racialized subjectivities.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Bitter/sweet childhoods: food and migration

Hiromi Goto’s unnamed narrator is an ‘unproven pregnant’ lesbian woman whose weird experience with an alien Kappa, probably the biological parent of an egg supposedly growing in her body, leads her to reminiscence on difficult passages of her childhood and adolescence. Sandra Almeida has described this novel as “a first-person narrative laden with ironic and humorous overtones [that recounts] the family’s dislocation, remembering the poor and destitute childhood in the hostile prairies of Alberta after their immigration from Osaka, in Japan, to Canada” (2009: 50). Reflecting on her sarcastic character, the narrator herself explains that

A child isn’t born bitter. I point no fingers as to who tainted the clean, pure pool of my childhood. Let’s just say that when I realized that I didn’t want to grow up, the damage was already done. Knowing that being grown up was no swell place to be means that you are grown up enough to notice. And you can’t go back from there. You have to forge another route, draw your own map. (Goto 2001: 13)

The narrative in this novel can be read as a map of her efforts to forge that route for her adult life, a mapping that draws upon the narrator’s memories of childhood because, as she realizes, “[m]y childhood spills into my adult life despite all my attempts at otherwise and the saturation of the past with the present is an ongoing story” (2001: 215); it is a story

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she revisits in order to explain her current state of confusion at her abnormal pregnancy from this kappa “of questionable gender and racial origin” (2001: 121).

Bich Minh Nguyen’s memoir *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* recalls her family’s settlement in Michigan “with five dollars and a knapsack of clothes” (Nguyen 2007: 1), after having fled Vietnam in 1975 when “everyone in Saigon knew the war was lost” (2007: 4), and it spans the years until 1997, when she returns “as a tourist in the country where I was supposed to have grown up, . . . a foreigner among people who were supposed to be mine” (2007: 245). Her first sights of America are those of a refugee camp at Fort Chaffee (Arkansas), “from behind the barbed-wire, chain-link fence” (2007: 8) where the patient exiles await for sponsors to join ‘the real America’, which for them is just an ambiguous abstraction built upon a mixture of clashing rumors: “The optimists said *easy money, fast cars, girls with blue eyes*; others said *cold, filled with crazy people*” (2007: 8; italics in the original). At this time, becoming American seems as easy as just crossing that barbed wire: “*We are a people without a country*, someone in the camp said. *Until we walk out of that gate*, my father replied. *And then we are American*” (2007: 10; italics in the original). For little Bich, from the very beginning, America is best identified with ‘exotic’ junk food: the chocolate bars that American soldiers guarding the camp give to her grandmother. From this moment onwards, she will learn about America through the new kinds of candy her father brings home every day (2007: 14). The happy days of naive ignorance she associates to these culinary discoveries: “We couldn’t get enough Luden’s wild-cherry-flavoured cough drops, or Pringles stacked in their shiny red canister, a mille-feuille of promises” (2007: 14). In a home where Christmas is a word that means nothing but glitter and gifts (2007: 14), Mr. Pringles is an equivalent of “Santa Claus or Mr. Heidenga [their American sponsor]—a big white man, gentle of manner, whose face signaled a bounty of provisions” (2007: 14). Food is a constant in Nguyen’s memoir, a major structural and thematic motif giving title to the book, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and to each of its sixteen chapters: ‘Pringles’, ‘Forbidden Fruit’, ‘Dairy Cone’, ‘Fast Food Asian’, etc.

The food motif in literary texts has been widely recognized as a most relevant marker of cultural difference (Cho 2010; Gabaccia 2000; Narayan 1997; Xu 2007) and it is a strong point in common of the two narratives I am considering here that will strongly affect their protagonists’ appraisal of Wilder’s text, an issue to be more carefully addressed in later sections of this essay. Heather Latimer summarizes the resort to this trope in relation to racial difference in her critical approach to Hiromi Goto’s fiction:

many feminists and post-colonialists connect food to theories on difference and ‘otherness’ and often use food metaphors to talk about race. This theoretical link between food and race is also often explored thematically in the literary works of racialized authors and those who write from subject positions at a tangent to dominant communities. Self-identified ‘ethnic’ or ‘hybrid’ authors, these writers explore links between memory, race and eating by writing about the experience of being identified by and ‘othered’ through food. For instance, in both of Hiromi Goto’s novels, *The Kappa Child* and *Chorus of Mushrooms*, eating is a gendered and racialized act that constantly informs how the characters see themselves emotionally and psychologically. Food, race and identity are slippery categories in Goto’s work, and she purposely mixes them up to highlight their constructed nature; eating is part of how the characters explore their backgrounds, tell their histories, and come to terms with racism. (2006: online)

Enoch Padolsky has linked food to space in his study of *The Kappa Child*, remarking how the protagonist “meets the Kappa at a restaurant, and her eventual lover at a Korean market. The urban food locales thus become key moments in the exploration of female

Japanese-Canadian identity that lies at the heart of the novel” (2005: 26). This is also the case in Nguyen’s narrative, where food clearly identifies distinct spaces, as in the chapter ‘School Lunch’, dedicated to her time at Ken-O-Shea Elementary School, ‘Holiday Tamales’, about the reunions with her stepmother Rosa’s Mexican-American family in Fruitport (Michigan), or ‘*Cha Gio*’, recalling her trip to Vietnam. However, it is the traditional association of women with cooking and domestic chores in the kitchen that gives them a prominent role in the ‘food equals culture’ synecdoche of migrant fiction, where mothers and grandmothers are responsible for ‘feeding’ their ‘home’ culture to new generations (see Inness 2001; Mannur 2009; Narayan 1997). It is indeed mothers and, in the case of Nguyen, also her grandmother, who do all the ‘ethnic’ cooking in their homes.<sup>2</sup>

The domestic space of home and family clearly mark their difference with respect to their surroundings, as neither of these families corresponds, for different reasons, with the ideal WASP model represented by the Ingalls family unit. Nguyen’s is, at the moment of their migration to America, an extended family formed by father, uncles, grandmother and two girls. After settling in Grand Rapids, Dad marries Rosa, a second generation Mexican-American with an eight year old girl of her own, Crissy. They will have a son, Vinh, followed by a number of foster children, refugees coming from Vietnam or Cambodia who do not last long with the Nguyens. They are too numerous and ethnically different to be considered a ‘normal’ American family, a fact the girls resent: “I wondered how I was going to explain this [new foster brother] to my friends at school. As it was, no one else lived with their grandmother and uncles; no one else had a step-sister and a half-brother” (Nguyen 2007: 204). Her family structure becomes even more complicated when Bich’s mother, disappeared for most of the book, suddenly reenters her life in 1993. Bich then finds out that her mother had also migrated to America ten years after their own move, in 1985, and that she has one half-brother and one half-sister who are older than her.<sup>3</sup>

Their Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners constitute a showcase of their multicultural identities, as described in this scene reminiscent of Gurinder Chadha’s film *What’s Cooking?*:

Besides tamales and tortillas, each holiday included a giant turkey that was sometimes cooked for half a day in a pit, a vat of mashed potatoes with gravy boats nearby, Stove Top stuffing, Pillsbury crescent rolls, canned corn soaked in butter, canned string beans mixed with cream of mushroom soup and baked with Durkee fired onions, frijoles, arroz con pollo, pumpkin empanadas and mashed sweet potatoes covered with mini-marshmallows toasted under the heat of the broiler. One of the *tíos* was married to a white woman who

<sup>2</sup> Bich Nguyen also expresses her admiration for the “cooking skills” of Laura Ingalls’ mother, “a domestic goddess” (2007: 157), a point I will return to later on.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, at the end of her book Nguyen associates her Americanness with the moment when they left her mother behind in Vietnam which, in my opinion, could be read as a physical and symbolic departure from the ‘mother-land’: “I think of escape—a last minute decision, night in a falling city, a departure without a single message left behind. What it must have been for my father, taking Anh and me into his arms, pursuing a boat, a way out, knowing all the while that our mother would not know where we were. . . . That I cannot imagine that moment, the panic and fear, the push to leave his country and aim for an unknown land, is perhaps his gift. It is my Americanness. What my father must have thought, what must have replayed in his mind for years—I cannot ever really grasp. In just a few minutes, in half a night, our lives changed. Our identities changed. We were Vietnamese, we were refugees, we were Americans. My father could not possibly regret it. I do not regret it. I am grateful for his unimaginable choice” (2007: 251).

always brought instant pistachio pudding mixed with plenty of Cool Whip and canned pineapple tidbits. The dessert side of the table held a collection of homemade and store-bought pumpkin pies. (Nguyen 2007: 174-75)

The narrator's family in Goto's *The Kappa Child* also gathers around the table, though at Easter. This family reunion takes place at the beginning of the novel and serves to present the tensions and history of violence between the patriarch Dad and the five women in the family: his wife and four daughters. Heather Latimer agrees this is a crucial scene since "how the family behaves and what they eat at Easter directly plays into their identity as a family and as 'Canadians'" (2006: online). Although the turkey is on the table and the narrator admits "we would have killed for a turkey when we were kids" (Goto 2001: 25), now that they are all adults there is no enjoyment whatsoever in this feast, and eating the food seems only a desperate cover to hide their fear of Dad, who hits his wife's face when one of the daughters announces she will be leaving her job, because, in his words, "[w]e are not a family of quitters!" (2001: 26). The sounds of cutlery and dishes orchestrate the mounting tension until the four daughters confront their father's next violent gesture with defiant silence:

We all stand, around the table, silent. And we are not small. Dad can see that we are grown. We aren't little children and he can't strike us anymore. His eyes scorch our faces, muscles in his jaw clenched into teeth, blood shooting into his forehead, our silent protest to his face. Rage frustrated, he turns the table itself. Grabs two fistfuls of tablecloth and pulls. Turkey carcass, stewed cabbage rolls, buns, sashimi, sekihan, potato salad, peas and carrots. The hours of work Okasan has spent, wasted on the floor. (2001: 27)

This family has been repeatedly described as "dysfunctional" (Latimer 2006: online; Notkin and Goto 2001: 17)<sup>4</sup> and "disorderly" (Pearson 2003: online). It certainly does not correspond to the usual edulcorated images of North American WASP ideal families, as the narrator acknowledges in the first pages: "We're not the sort of people that walk together, at dawn or otherwise, exclaiming at nature and the shades of lavender-pink on the horizon" (Goto 2001: 13). Her violent father and her mother's submission function as harsh models of gender propriety that their four daughters will internalize and resist in different ways, as will be commented in more detail later on. Responding to a question about possible differences between Japanese and Western views on family, Goto remarks on the higher risks for migrant women and children in abusive relationships, since "the family unit becomes particularly important to immigrants who find themselves isolated in a mainstream culture not of their own. And when this 'safe haven' becomes dangerous terrain the sense of isolation increases exponentially" (Notkin and Goto 2002: 18).<sup>5</sup> Like Bich, Goto's narrator also expresses her wish that she could have a 'normal' family: "I just want to have a normal life! I just want to have a normal family! But I'm always tossed into this tornado, this Wizard of Oz meets Godzilla at the Little House on the Prairie" (2001: 244).

<sup>4</sup> This is a term appearing in most of the promotional summaries for the book in e-bookstores, including Amazon.

<sup>5</sup> Although Bich Nguyen's father is not depicted as abusive or exerting physical violence on the family, he is described as "someone I mostly tried to avoid. He was moody, with an unpredictable temper, and nobody wanted to be in range when he got angry" (Nguyen 2007: 229). Besides, he is often criticized for his gambling and drinking, which will lead to the couple's divorce.

### 3. Laura Ingalls, heroine and villain

Following the motif that links her memories, Bich Nguyen's first mention of Laura Ingalls' story refers to food, which emerges as the initial magnet attracting little Bich to the figure of Laura: "All of my fictional friends liked to eat, but perhaps no one did more than Laura Ingalls Wilder" (2007: 153). Food descriptions fill six whole pages of Nguyen's section on the *Little House on the Prairie* book series and give title to the chapter dedicated to all her literary heroines, 'Salt Pork'.<sup>6</sup> Every action of the Ingallses is understood by Bich in relation to food:

For the Ingalls family out on the plains and prairies, every harvest means a year of leanness or a year of fullness. The long days of sowing and haying and threshing could be distilled into a single sourdough biscuit fresh from Ma's oven. . . . The days mean fighting against blackbirds that ravaged the corn and oats. Once, Ma gathers the blackbirds to make a pie. "The meat was so tender that it slipped from the bones", writes Wilder. (2007: 153)

Her identification with Laura's appetite is so strong that she fantasizes of her becoming Laura Ingalls: "After I read the *Little House on the Prairie* books I began to pretend that bacon was salt pork and that I was Laura herself. She was short and small like me, and she savored every last touch of the salt on her tongue" (2007: 158). Envious of her (conventionally) good-looking neighbor Jennifer Vander Wal, who first gave her the book *Little House in the Big Woods* as a birthday present, Bich also feels vindicated via Laura when she slaps her sister Mary in the book:

Mary was showing off her blond hair, letting Laura know that it was the prettiest of all and that no one cared for brown hair like Laura's. It was a dull, dirt brown, Laura admitted, and knowing it 'swelled her throat tight'. So she slapped Mary, and that's when I thought, I could like this girl. The older Laura grew, the smarter, sassier, and more likeable she became. She, too, has a blond-haired nemesis, Nellie Oleson, who sniffs at her and calls her 'country folk'. And Laura never stints on food. (2007: 154)

This identification is based, beyond their shared physical 'unbecomingness' and common appreciation of food (due to its scarcity), on the fact that, as Bich herself acknowledges, "[i]n many ways, their pioneer life reminded me of immigrant life. As they search for new homesteads, they, too, experience isolation and the scramble for shelter, food, work, and a place to call home" (2007: 159). Thus, it is the narrative of displacement and resettling in the Wilder books that captures Bich's emotional sympathy, because she envisions Laura's uprooting as parallel to that of the Vietnamese refugees:

In the opening scene of *Little House on the Prairie* the Ingallses say good-bye to their family in Wisconsin, and the finality is chilling. They don't know if they will ever see each other again. Without mail or telephones, the rest of the family is left wondering for months what happened—if they survived, if they were okay, where they had ended up. (2007: 159)

Like most exiles, refugees and migrants, "every time the Ingallses move they have to break new sod and start a new farm from scratch" (Nguyen 2007: 158), an experience shared also by Goto's narrator, whose family literally starts a new farm from scratch

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<sup>6</sup> For Nguyen salt pork in the *Little House* books "represents both failure and prosperity: a failure to produce a hardy, self-sustaining farm that included fresh pork; a prosperity that allowed the purchase of meat from the store" (2007: 158).

pursuing her father's most unsuitable dream of growing a rice plantation in the midst of the dry prairies of Alberta:

Dad dreamt a futile dream but one he never gave up. Is that respectable? Maybe it was the ultimate challenge, the last immigrant frontier: to do the impossible in a hostile land. Maybe he was an asshole and couldn't admit he was wrong. Either way, the results are the same for the rest of us now. We drag around the baggage of our lives together. (Goto 2001: 192)

Despite the poverty of their childhood days, these girls are raised to feel gratitude to the host country. North America is the promised land of plenty and freedom that has saved them from war, executions, torture, reeducation camps (Nguyen 2007: 4), or extreme poverty:

My Okasan suggests that I should complain a little less. That we ought to be grateful that our family came to Canada. We should see what life is like in Japan before we complain about things here. If we still lived in Nihon, Okasan murmurs, I would be happily married with two kids and my two younger sisters wouldn't even be conceived, let alone born, Japan such a crowded and expensive country. As if this should make me feel better! (Goto 2001: 13)

Although Laura's story coincides with both girls' displacement, there are obvious and irreconcilable differences in their racialized experiences of resettlement. Bich Nguyen perceptively indicates how whiteness automatically grants the privilege of *belonging* to European migrants:

As the Ingallses travel in their wagon, looking for their last stop, they meet settlers from Norway, Sweden, Germany. "They're good neighbours", Pa says. "But I guess our kind of folks is pretty scarce". Yet these European immigrant families would one day cease to be foreign and become 'our kind of folks'. Like the Ingallses, they would blend in, become American, eventually refer to their ancestry as something fond and distant. "Trust a Scotchwoman to manage", Pa says admiringly of Ma. The children of European immigrants would be able to answer the question "Where are you from?" with "Out East", or "Wisconsin", or "Minnesota", and no one would say, "No, I mean where are you *really* from?" (Nguyen 2007: 159)

The persistent refusal of the dominant WASP ideology to accept Bich and her family as "our kind of folk" is internalized by this girl who "came of age in the 1980s, before diversity and multicultural awareness trickled into western Michigan. Before ethnic was cool" (Nguyen 2007: 10). Her childhood is painfully marked by an abundance of signs of exclusion that proclaim Grand Rapids to be "An All-American City": "As a kid, I couldn't figure out what 'All-American' was supposed to mean. Was it promise, a threat, a warning?" (2007: 10). With time, she comes to think this was certainly more of a warning than a promise, as her identity crisis sharpens in her teen years, when she realizes her identity can never be expressed in the singular: "It was too much for me to synthesize white American culture, Mexican-American culture, and my own Vietnamese culture all at the same time. I couldn't explain, either to Rosa or myself, that in wanting to belong everywhere I ended up belonging nowhere at all" (2007: 176). Laura Ingalls and her family, on the contrary,

were the epitome of American. They memorized the Declaration of Independence, knew an inexhaustible number of hymns and American folk songs, and took pride in being 'free and independent'. They had big, 'Westward Ho!' ideas about migration, property, and

ownership. They built homes everywhere they landed. . . . They had such confidence in the building, such righteous belief in the idea of home, in the right to land, in the life of farming. (2007: 159)

Thus the ideologies of Laura and Bich start to part ways, when Bich is able to see through the adventurous side of Laura to identify the ideological premises on which her migratory movement is based: “As I grew older, I had an increasingly uneasy time reading the books. The Ingallses were a pious group; they loved church, knew the Bible inside and out, and sometimes reminded me uncomfortably of the Vander Wals and all the other hard-core Christians I had encountered in Grand Rapids” (2007: 160). Nguyen’s comment points her finger at the extremely conservative political agenda of Laura Ingalls’ books, which Anita Fellman has dared to see as all pervasive “covert instruction” (2008: 5) in the Republican values that gave power to Ronald Reagan and his successors in the presidency. Fellman is not alone in pointing out the strong influence of this children’s series not only on American culture and internal politics, but even also on their foreign policy; Noriko Suzuki has demonstrated its political mission as part of the General Head Quarters’ program for establishing a democratic Japan based on American principles, in her revealing study of the introduction of Wilder’s books in Japan (in translation):

Under GHQ’s educational reform policy, a large number of American books were selected by GHQ for translation and publication in postwar Japan. Interestingly, Wilder’s *The Long Winter* [sixth in the series] was chosen with the recommendation from the Supreme Commander, General Douglas MacArthur, himself. (2006: 67)

It is relevant for the assessment of their ideological weight that the books to be translated under this program were not chosen “for entertainment value or literary superiority but solely on the basis of what they might contribute to fulfillment of the obligations and needs of the Japanese people under the Postdam Declaration” (GHQ report qtd in Suzuki 2006: 67). The promotional newspaper reviews of the translation thus promoted it in Japan as a “book which effectively illuminates the great spirit of American citizens. The traditional great American spirit illuminated in this book teaches us that what we need the most to overcome hardships and reach bliss is not a splendid act of heroism, but a little honesty, diligence, creation, and courage in our daily life” (qtd in Suzuki 2006: 68). MacArthur, who envisioned Japan as Western civilization’s last frontier, felt that the *Little House on the Prairie* books vividly captured the American values of frontier individualism. According to Suzuki, Japanese postwar readers especially identified with Laura’s narrative of hunger and hardship in *The Long Winter*, sharing common experiences of malnutrition to the point of starvation, disease and lack of basic resources (2006: 71).<sup>7</sup>

Nguyen offers a poignant reflection on the appeal of Wilder’s classic stories for thousands of girls and women despite their indoctrination into gender and racial submission, where identification with the heroine can only take place in the reader’s imaginative world:

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<sup>7</sup> Suzuki reminds us that “[o]ver one thousand civilians starved to death within three months after the war’s end. Children were extremely malnourished, and mothers saw their babies die in their arms from starvation and malnourishment. . . . A quarter of a million people died from dysentery. In such unbearably hard conditions, *The Long Winter* seemed to the Japanese a story of themselves” (2006: 71).

In a way, it makes sense that I would become enamored with a literature so symbolic of manifest destiny and white entitlement. I didn't have any nonwhite literature, anyway, to know what else I could become. My favorite books, the ones I gravitated to, were as white or as Anglo as a person could get. Though my relationship with the Ingalls family and other white characters grew complicated, I had a strong reserve of denial, an ability to push away the unpleasant parts. For I had created, if somewhat unknowingly, a group portrait of protagonists—girls I wished I could be. (2007: 160)

Her acute awareness of the impossibility of attaining such desire is manifest, as she well knows that “[g]irls like Jennifer Vander Wal and Holly Jansen could legitimately pretend to be Anne of Green Gables or Jo March, but a Vietnamese girl like me could never even have lived near them” (2007: 163). The dream of becoming Laura Ingalls requires the absolute excision or obliteration of her Asian identity, as she admits: “I made myself over into the whitest girl possible. No doubt this contributed to the quick erosion of my Vietnamese. I thought if I could know inside and out how my heroines lived and what they ate and what they loved . . . I could be them, too” (2007: 163). She devotes herself intensively as a girl to this impossible mission of complete assimilation:

When I think of Grand Rapids I think of how much time I spent trying to make real the dream of the blond-haired girl with a Betty Crocker mother and a kitchen to match. . . . Spurning my own reflection for what it could never give me, I thought I could make myself over from the inside out. (2007: 247)

Since she cannot physically become a white girl, she turns to religion for a happier solution to her troubles, taking her grandmother's Buddhist belief in reincarnation as the key to her transformation into the melodramatic heroine in the books she loves:

I took this view of reincarnation on literal terms. I began to guess at the lives I had had. I became convinced that I had once been a sad and lonely blond girl who lived in a cold mansion isolated on a moor in England. I saw myself sitting close to the fireplace in my bedroom, looking out the window at a bleak, gray landscape. No visitors. I had died young there. (2007: 183).

Hiromi Goto has expressed her political aim of exposing “the colonial mentality that we might have swallowed unnoticed when we read the Little House books as children” (Notkin and Goto 2002: 18). As in Nguyen's recognition that “I didn't have any nonwhite literature, anyway, to know what else I could become” quoted above, Goto is especially worried by the appalling lack of literature for children with non-white protagonists, which has moved her to write two fantasy books for young readers—*The Water of Possibility* (2001) and *Half World* (2009)—featuring Japanese-Canadian characters.

This has been in fact a major problem regarding the *Little House on the Prairie* books, as a heated debate erupted in the mid-nineteen-nineties on the suitability of maintaining this book in school libraries, on accusations that “the book is ‘offensive to Native Americans’ or ‘promotes racial epithets’ or ‘contains attitudes offensive to Native Americans’” (Kilgore 2005: online). One such explicit criticism comes from Osage writer Dennis McAuliffe, who was shocked to realize “a book so unsuitable” is still in “such demand by impressionable children” (2009: online):

[Native Americans] appear in her book only as beggars and thieves, and she adds injury to insult by comparing the Osages—who turned Thomas Jefferson's head with their dignity and grace—to reptiles, to garbage or scum (depending on the definition of the word she actually uses). Mrs. Wilder assigns them descriptive adjectives that connote barbarism, brutality, and bloodthirstiness, and makes much ado about their odor. But she makes light of

their obvious plight: In one passage, she describes almost mockingly the skeletal figures of two Osages who are fed cornbread by Ma, the eating noises they make and the pitiful sight of them stooping to eat specks of food they spot on the floor. (2009: online)

Although Native Americans have been more vocal and active in the campaigns to ban *Little House in the Prairie*, it is my core argument here that the racist stereotyping offered by the Ingalls narratives also deeply affect other racialized communities' perception of themselves. McAuliffe resents the lack of protest from non-Native readers by asserting that “[i]f Pa Ingalls had built his little house on the periphery of an antebellum southern mansion and Mrs. Wilder had described its Black slaves in the same terms she depicted the Osage Indians, her book long ago would have been barred from children’s eyes, or at least sanitized like some editions of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” (2009: online). Meanwhile, the girl narrators in these two Asian North American narratives of growth clearly perceive that exclusion from the ‘pioneer myth’ based on race would also extend to them because they are not white, thus clearly exposing racism for what it is, the privileging of white people over everyone else.<sup>8</sup> Bich Nguyen as a child realizes that “[m]y dislike for Ma was cemented in her dislike of Indians, whom she called ‘howling savages’. I knew that if I had lived in De Smet she would never have let Laura consort with me” (2007: 157). Furthermore, she is well aware that racism in the book does not concern First Nations peoples exclusively but also African Americans, and could easily be the case of her own race:

Then there was the issue of racism. Not just Ma Ingall’s hatred of Indians, which persisted no matter what Pa said. In *Little House in the Big Woods* the family sings a song about ‘a little darky’. In *Little Town on the Prairie* Pa and a group of men folk put on a blackface and perform a vaudeville show for the town. “Look at those darkies’s feet”, they sing, prancing around stage. “Those darkies can’t be beat” I knew that people like me would also have been considered outcasts, heathens, and strangers; we didn’t even count. (2007: 160)

Wilder’s portrayal of Native Americans is especially problematic for *The Kappa Child’s* narrator, because her only friend and neighbor Gerald happens to be a mixed-race indigenous boy: “Gerald Nakamura Coming Singer was incomprehensible. In Laura Ingalls’ book-world, Indians meant teepees on the prairies and that was that. Indians didn’t equal someone who was both Blood and Japanese Canadian. Indians certainly never meant someone who lived next door on a chicken farm.” (Goto 2001: 188).

The huge gap between the contemporary realities of indigenous peoples and their depiction in the Wilder books is not one exclusive to her fictionalized memoirs but indeed still dominant in representations of Native peoples in mainstream culture, as Gerald’s mother points out in the novel:

“Whatchya staring at, kiddo? You never seen a First Nations person before?” “First Nations?” “Yeah, kiddo. Don’t cut me any of the ‘Indian’ crap, how they keep on teaching that shit in school, I’ll never understand”. (2001: 188-89)

The debate on the suitability of the book and on the convenience of its banning from schools tells volumes about race ideologies in North America. While Native communities and other racialized groups have bitterly complained because this book is taught and recommended in schools, white critics have readily come out in defense of the

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to discredit McAuliffe’s argument that there are in fact huge differences in the influence of diverse racialized communities in North American cultural policies.

‘complexity’ of race representation in the books, focusing on the often contrasting attitudes of Ma and Pa towards Indians (Heldrich 2000: 100). For instance, Kilgore sustains that “[r]ead with a decent minimum of care, *Little House* emerges as no reassertion of the pioneer myth, but an earnest, perceptive, and sometimes painful critique of it, all the more remarkable in that it is targeted for children of elementary school age” (2005: online). He defends Laura’s attention to “the moral ambiguities of the family’s westward adventure” (2005: online).<sup>9</sup> John E. Miller (2008) takes his praise even further, when he writes that

Placing Wilder’s published writings and private thoughts in their proper context, it should be apparent that she—rather than being guilty of gross insensitivity or blatant prejudice toward Indians—was considerably advanced in her attitudes toward Indians in particular and toward other ethnic groups in general. Considering the circumstances in which she grew up and the conditions in which she lived most of her life, her stance was a substantial accomplishment. The better question to ask is not why she was so bad in this regard but why she was relatively so good. (qtd in Lefebvre 2009: 274-75)

A significant scene in *Little House on the Prairie* that has raised heated debate is that where Laura Ingalls asks her father for a “papoose”, a “resonant moment” (Heldrich 2000: 106)<sup>10</sup> that Hiromi Goto critiques in a chapter titled ‘Laura Ingalls Wanted to See a Papoose Something Awful’ (2001: 188). Rachel Seidman has interpreted this scene in the following terms:

Some will argue that this moment represents a romantic white appropriation of the Indian child. This may be so, but there is also a clear yearning for a crossing of boundaries, a desire to somehow connect with this other child, which compels the reader to recognize a message far more complicated than one of hatred. Wilder is constrained, yes, by her own inability to truly know the Indian child, but she fights against those constraints. (2003: online)

While an adult reader might perhaps be compelled to recognize that complex message, the book is read primarily by children, and we can legitimately wonder how a child would receive this scene. Goto offers not one, but two different children’s reactions in her book. The first appears towards the beginning of the novel, symbolically at the moment the family reaches the barren land that will become their new home in Alberta, when one of the sisters offers a less admiring view of Laura’s pioneer life: “I don’t get it’, Slither said. ‘Why does that Laura girl want to see a papoose so bad? I bet there were a lot of flies in that wagon. It’s kinda sad that the dog got swept away in the river. Do you think salt pork is like bacon?’” (2001: 43). Later on, in the chapter with the telling title, the narrator unveils her own uneasiness with Laura’s desire:

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<sup>9</sup> Ann Romines makes a similar defense based on Laura’s interrogation of her family’s settling in “Indian country” (1997: 47), while Heldrich’s advice that “Laura’s remarks in the concluding scenes must be read with regard to her age and her lack of a mature self-consciousness and understanding, which prevent the transcendent growth Wolf claims for her” (2000: 105) is hard to accept when the analysis by Fellman 2008 and Miller 2008 of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s and her daughter Rose Wilder Lane’s authorial decisions is considered: Laura’s naivety may well play an interested political role in sustaining the racial prerogatives in the frontier thesis.

<sup>10</sup> For a summary of the conflicting critical responses to this episode see Hedrick 2000: 106.

'Laura Ingalls Wanted to See a Papoose Something Awful'

And I didn't know why. Why did she want to have someone else's baby? Did she think the baby would be happier with the Ingalls than riding off with the rest of the family? Did she think the baby was more like a doll than a human child? Didn't she know that the mom wouldn't think giving the baby to Laura was such a good idea? I was puzzled. (2001: 188)

Her 'naive' response clearly views Laura's desire to have a papoose as whimsical and reifying, coming from someone who does not see Native peoples as human beings. For Goto, every non-indigenous person living in North America, migrants explicitly included in her statement, must be aware of their location on occupied lands: "We all have the responsibility to examine our sense of entitlement of living on First Nations land. How are we complicit in the ongoing oppression of the people of the First Nations? What are we doing about it?" (Notkin and Goto 2002: 18).

#### 4. In and out of the Little House's gender trap

In their ideological defense of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier theory, the indoctrination into courage, heroic survival and resilience in the face of hardship that the Wilder narratives promote is clearly masculinist and prevents the expression of emotional distress or 'weakness'. This view of pioneer heroism helps reinforce the patriarchal hegemony and male dominance that Ann Romines (1997) has studied in detail in the whole *Little House* series. Both Nguyen and Goto allude to the gender divisions represented in the book *Little House on the Prairie*. For Nguyen, "[w]hile Mary is Ma's daughter, Laura is Pa's" (2007: 157), and little Bich is clearly on Laura and Pa's side. She admires that "[l]ike her father Laura has an itchy wandering foot, a desire to keep pushing on to see what lands lie beyond the horizon" (2007: 156-57), while Ma and Mary represent the proper femininity that Ma intends to transmit to her daughters: "sensible, strict Ma, a former schoolteacher, had long ago made her husband promise to settle down so her girls could get an education and become teachers, too. Ma and Mary frequently got on my nerves. They were so ladylike all the time, so disciplined about chore time" (2007: 157).

Goto's narrator, on her part, who often suffers the violent outbursts of her abusive father, admires the apparently egalitarian and peaceful relationship of the Ingalls marriage; however, a question from her sister makes her reconsider this:

"Did Laura's pa hit ma?" PG muttered.

"He never hit her! Ever! He played the violin!" I exclaimed. Though something gnawed inside. I hadn't noticed before, but now that I read it out loud, Ma seemed so much weaker than I'd imagined. "Oh, Charles", she said. "Whatever you think, Charles". (2001: 43; italics in the original)

She thus comes to confound her own submissive and apologetic mother and Caroline, Laura's Ma, replying to her question "What are you doing girls" with "Just reading, Ma . . . I mean, Okasan!" (2001: 43).

Another crucial and highly charged scene in *The Kappa Child* may help illustrate my argumentation on the masculinist values ingrained in young readers by the pioneer myth in Laura Ingalls' story. When little Gerald comforts his friend the narrator with a kiss, she reacts violently to her own emotional confusion—she admits to be "shocked,

embarrassed, elated, I don't know what" (2001: 200)—by insulting him with references to his 'effeminate weakness':

"Hey, sissy boy", I sneered. "I don't let sissy boys touch me. Ever . . ." "Yeah", I yelled. "Go on! Pansy! Go on home to your slut mother!" I screamed until I was hoarse and gasping.

A heavy hand on my shoulder, I almost fell out of myself, squeaked in sudden fear.

"Good for you", my father nodded approvingly. "Shouldn't be friends with weaklings".

Dad was proud of me. (2001: 200-01)

Her cruelty towards her only friend will make him leave the chicken farm and his mother; her disgust at her own violence will leave an indelible psychological scar. Interestingly, she seems to blame Laura Ingalls for instilling in her such a limiting ideology in terms of race and gender, because the moment she sees Gerald leave for good she decides to get rid of Laura by burning the book:

"Who is going to be there for you if I'm gone?" Laura whispered.

"Shut up!" I shouted. Ripping faster and faster. Baby Carrie whimpered. My heart pounding in my head. . . . I poked the mess so the embers wouldn't go out, until every page was blackened and the print unreadable. (2001: 217)

From this act of destruction she gets some comfort, and "[a]fter Gerald moved away and I killed Laura Ingalls, my life settled into childhood stasis" (2001: 222). However, this will prove to be a false truce, as Laura returns in a gothic poltergeist scene:

On the television, Melissa Gilbert, playing Laura Ingalls, runs across a stretch of prairie, whooping, leaping, jubilant. The music is sunny and playful. 'Da da dada. Da da daaaaa. Da da dada! Daaa da da—'

The hairs on my arms tingle, shiver, stand in a rush of goosebumps.

The camera angle is wide and Melissa runs closer and closer. Until her face fills the screen. The music is gone. Only the sound of wind in the grass. And as I watch, her face hardens, the skin slowly browns, tightens, pressing against bones, her eyes glitter bright in her starving face, lips cracked with malnutrition. Her braids are messy, the hair dull and brittle. The child grins and her teeth are yellow and crooked. (2001: 252)

The persistence of this haunting Laura proves that, contrary to the narrator's wishes "that childhood could be a book . . . that could be put away on a shelf. Even boxed and locked into storage should the need arise" (2001: 215) or burnt, as she does with Laura's childhood narrative, there is no such possibility, "[c]hildhood is not a book and it doesn't end" (2001: 215).

## 5. Conclusions

In the dialogue that follows Laura's poltergeist apparition to the narrator on the TV screen, Laura complains that the editors have changed the real story in her book, the tragic story of hardship, hunger and dislocation that her ghost figure represents: "Oh, I know what they said. 'The book is for children! Children need happy stories!' Damn them all to hell!" (2001: 252). She then asks the narrator to do something to retrieve and make public her real experience and "transforms back into Melissa Gilbert as music swells in the

background” (2001: 253). Anita Fellman (2008) sustains that it was Laura Ingalls Wilder herself, with the help of her daughter Rose Wilder Lane, who purposely deviated from her life experience and historical facts in order to emphasize the autonomy of her family and thus criticize “the New Deal policies they believed were signs of a massive crisis in American values during the Great Depression” (Lefebvre 2009: 273). Goto’s novel indeed produces a counter-narrative to that offered in the Wilder series, “suggesting to the reader that in the end it is the Wilder novels (and the TV series based on them) which are really a fantasy of pioneer life in contrast to the harsh reality experienced by the narrator’s family” (Pearson 2003: online).<sup>11</sup>

We can go even further to suggest that, in fact, it is Laura’s distress and hunger that raises the sympathies of these two girl readers, who identify with her misery in the same way the postwar Japanese readers did. Refugee Bich understands well that “[a] pioneer in a covered wagon had to keep a careful eye on the provisions, gauge how much to eat and how much to save for the rutted path ahead” (Nguyen 2007: 158). Goto’s description of Laura (in her first apparition to the narrator at the moment of burning her book) is much closer to the reality of the displaced and destitute than the many images we have of her:

I flung a look behind me. Laura’s face. No rosy cheeks. No milky skin. No snapping brown eyes. She was gaunt. The fingers that clutched my shoulders were cracked, nails chipped, wrinkled with malnutrition. And behind her. Mary’s listless, colorless eyes. Baby Carrie’s legs bowed, scrawny with rickets. (Goto 2001: 217)

The appeal of the more subversive sides of Laura Ingalls’ personality, such as her nomadic spirit, her interrogation of her family’s occupation of ‘Indian territory’, her thirst for adventure and the real hunger due to her continuous displacement explain these two Asian North American girls’ devotion to their literary heroine. The privileges of belonging and national identity held by even the poorest whites among the destitute migrants, however, distance these girls across racial borders. Despite two decades of multiculturalist policies in both North American states and, in more recent years, the rise of a transnationalist discourse, feminist and antiracist criticisms of this cherished classic have provoked virulent reactions which indicate that its WASP ideology of conservative individualism and racialization is not outdated. Nguyen and Goto contribute significantly, with their imaginative and artistic responses to Wilder’s texts, to keeping the debate alive, as they provide alternative readings and, what is more important, counter-narratives to the racial and gender constructions of the founding myth of pioneer heroic survival.

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<sup>11</sup> McAuliffe makes a similar point regarding the lack of historical accuracy in the ‘TV series’ portrayal of pioneer life: “Osage writer John Joseph Mathews could have been staring at a family portrait of the Ingallses when he described the covered wagons filling up Osage land as being full of ‘dirty-faced children peering out from the curtains, and weary, hard-faced women lolling in the seat beside evil-eyed, bearded men’. The actor Michael Landon was horribly miscast as Pa in the television series ‘Little House on the Prairie’. Landon was too sweet-faced, clean-shaven—and focused” (2009: online).

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