Department of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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How I Wrote My Prospectus

Disclaimer: The experience of writing (and defending) one's prospectus is heavily dependent on one's departmental affiliation and advisor(s); what I share are just my own personal reflections.

For me, although intimidating in premise, assembling the prospectus was an intellectually generative—and even enjoyable—process. In terms of departmental support, American Studies requires students enroll in a prospectus workshop for one semester (there is an optional second I opted against), in addition to managing a Dropbox of prior prospectuses that writers can always access. I also had advisors who were available and attentive readers (although, I was not too diligent in sending drafts in advance). Ideationally, the prospectus expanded upon two research papers I had written during coursework years, meaning I had some preexisting materials—on methodologies, primary sources, and literature reviews—from which I heavily drew. Logistically, the prospectus was pieced together over the course of four months: a draft by the end of workshop semester, later revised and finalized a couple of weeks before the colloquium/defense. From initial idea to final form, the prospectus was an approachable genre given the prior research as well as departmental, advisory, and peer support. Although, as someone without much foresight, I had most difficulty with the chapter breakdown section. Unlike research papers that require sustained analysis through close engagement with the texts/objects, the chapter breakdown section lends itself toward a more speculative form of thinking and writing (what's ahead of me), which I found difficult while amidst qualifying exams, in addition to my intellectual habitus (what's in front of me). Some peers, however, felt the opposite: They knew their case studies/chapters but took longer with the more conceptual and methodological parts of the prospectus.

Advice for Prospectus Writers

As hopefully elicited in the description of my process above, the prospectus can be approached as a genre of assemblage rather than craft: cobbling together notes, conversations, and past work and rearranging them into a working document that was comprehensible, rather than writing a magnum opus of sorts. In this way, I considered the prospectus to be a functional document that I just needed to complete as a means to redirect the rest of my bandwidth to qualifying exam preparations and eventually advance to candidacy. Reminding myself of these lower stakes—that the prospectus is just pass/fail (more like pass/pass, as "failing" would take the form of revising and resubmitting)—was key to just getting it done. Although I consider the advice—"The best dissertation is a done dissertation"—to be easier said than actually done, I find its overall sentiment to be helpful and more easily applied to the prospectus as a shorter document, a shorter hurdle, in the middle of (rather than the culmination to) one's Ph.D. program.

To: The Graduate Faculty in American Studies, Yale University
I present the following for your approval as the subject of my dissertation for the doctorate:

Corrugated Care:
The Kinship of Cardboard and an Enfolding Empire

I request that Professors Lisa Lowe and Sunny Xiang co-supervise the dissertation and that Professors Mary Lui and Roderick Ferguson serve on the committee.

Minh Huynh Vu
April 19, 2023

Table of Contents

I. Opening and Overview

Anticipating the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the United States government cobbled together Operation Babylift, an emergency mandate calling for the rescue and relocation of over two thousand Vietnamese—mostly orphaned—children. In response to this "refugee problem"[1], President Gerald Ford heralded an ad hoc humanitarian network of volunteer pilots, nurses, and missionaries to assist with how to handle this "excess of two thousand refugees."[2] Consecrated with a moral post and confounded with a managerial puzzle, these volunteers displayed innovative and inventive judgement by refurbishing leftover cardboard boxes into makeshift baby bassinets. As nurse LeAnn Thieman, later recognized as a national hero, describes:

> "Down the center was a row of about twenty cardboard boxes, each approximately two feet square. Two to three babies were lying in each box. A long strap was secured at one end of the plan. From there it was stretched over the boxes, then attached to the other end of the plane to hold the boxes securely in place. Several large, metal trash cans were at each end of the row with food, formula, and supplies for the trip."[3]

Rather than focus on the array of unsupervised and unnamed infants precariously crammed into cardboard boxes and strapped into airplane seats, Thieman instead visualizes the mechanics of Operation Babylift itself. The term "boxes" appears more than that of "babies," as the nurse qua operations manager indexes the numerical supply of the cardboard cribs, their arrangement, and their standardized contents. Why this fascination, especially over an innocuous material like cardboard?

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[1] Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 252.
[2] Edward J. Daly, "Visit to Indochina," Telegram from World Airways, Inc. to U.S. Department of State, March 1975.
[3] LeAnn Thieman and Carol Dey, "Aboard an Operation Babylift Plan" in *This Must Be My Brother: The Daring Rescue of Innocent Children in the Final Desperate Hours of the Vietnam War* (Whittaker: Chariot Victor Publishing Books, 1995).

This minor object is the major concern of my dissertation. My central starting point are these Operation Babylift bassinets. More broadly, I seek to reexamine histories of transpacific empire through the overlooked object of the cardboard box as an everyday material and synecdoche of militarisms. Tracking the government-commissioned innovations and circulations of corrugative technologies from the mid-20th century onward, I chart the insidious history of cardboard as an everyday infrastructure central to the reproductive management of global markets and militarisms. For example, note the inconspicuous, though not insignificant, marker of the "V3c" label in the next two figures:

Figures 1 and 2: (left) a group of Vietnamese children, American volunteers, and their boxes loaded in a C-141 plane, awaiting departure from Saigon; and (right) Vietnamese children nestled and nursed in their cardboard cribs prior to takeoff. Red circles are overlaid to highlight the V3c label. (Photographs reproduced from LeAnn Thieman, "Hear LeAnn's Operation Babylift Story," SelfCare for HealthCare; and Paul Shute, "Operation Babylift Veterans receive retroactive benefits through VA help," *Vantage Point*, December 2019)

Here, the V3c label indexes a military grade cardboard box specifically commissioned by and designed for the U.S. government in the efficient transportation of wartime goods, meaning that the cribs used to house orphans were (and are) the same weather-graded cases that have been used to haul wartime supplies since World War II, including ammunitions, lunchbox rations, and blood tranfusions.

In this way, the cardboard box operates as a transhistorical site that has been vital in supplying and sustaining military operations. As a container of care, the cardboard box and its iterative constructions across the long 20th century are not just secondary vessels through which militarisms and markets operate. Rather, they are the structural units wherein the martial and the monetary conjugate in the very social reproduction of U.S. empire through the global management of kinship relations during and after imperial war.

The history of corrugated cardboard, then, is not simply a case of cargo, but also U.S. empire's broader commitment to care when considering the box's financial *and* familial function in the transnational production of racialized kinships. Cardboard, then, expands current research on transnational adoption in the ongoing afterlife of imperial war by materializing how military logistics organize kinship "as not simply or solely an individual private matter" but as "a highly racialized and gendered" network of producing a "new supply of potential adoptees"[4] in a confounding "relationship between commodification and care."[5]

In the ongoing aftermath of transpacific war, the stories of Operation Babylift victims have been predominantly renarrated through a politics of recovery via methodologies of oral history, investigative journalism, and literary speculation. But how can extant scholarship on the legacies of overseas empire and racialized adoption also account for the uninterpretable intimacies of the uninterred and uninterrable? I hypothesize that possible answers, and even more questions, await in a contemplation of cardboard: an analytical vessel through which to consider the different creases, corners, and even collapses of history. In other words, this study seeks to

[4] Jodi Kim, "An 'Orphan' with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2009), 856-8.
[5] Sara K. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York City: New York University Press, 2006), 3.

sketch an impossible account for those orphans who could not make it—the unaccounted for who/which have been hidden beneath the flimsy folds of humanitarian rescue.

Through this longer genealogy of corrugative technology, I study cardboard as a global infrastructure that remains vitally central for the management of racial differences in the ongoing transits of capitalism and imperialism. In this reanimation of Operation Babylift, rather than begin with the babies—the heuristic of humanism through which liberal empire has rationalized its international stature through racialized rescue—a consideration of cardboard constructs an alternative historiography. In turn, I seek to collect the remaining scraps of cardboard to sketch an even more scattered cartography of the ever-enfolding enterprise of empire.

II. Literature Reviews

Asian American Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies

Introduction & "Intervention"

Engaging the War in Vietnam and its ongoing effects in bolstering campaigns of militarized technological development, transnational adoption arrangements, and international humanitarian aid, this dissertation draws from intertwined academic genealogies of Asian American Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies in its analysis of militarisms and transpacific empire. From the development and deployment of military weapons of mass destruction to the hapless and hopeless Vietnamese refugee as the immediate products of war, these "objects" of analysis have been shepherded and shuttled across decades of academic scholarship.[6]

[6] See Keva X. Bui, "Objects of Warfare: Infrastructures of Race and Napalm in the Vietnam War," *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (2021): 299-313 and Yến Lê Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410-433.

At the same time, given my particular focus on the cardboard box and its epistemic complications as a ubiquitous yet ephemeral archive of empire, I am also noticing how cardboard—as another material and metonym of militarisms—may complicate the intellectual frames of Asian Americans and Critical Refuge(e) Studies. Constructing other corners and cracks of analytical consideration, the baby bassinets confound any logics of legibility given the unnamed, unarrived, and unalived status of their infantile inhabitants.

In this way, I am interested in the recent turn in Asian American Studies—via Queer Theory—toward subjectless critique à la Kandice Chuh not as a way to correct the creases, cracks, and crevices of cardboard but to consider them as sites of tenuous and troubl(ed/ing) knowledge themselves. Likewise, I am also ruminating upon how the category of the "refugee" may not (fully) map onto the victims of Operation Babylift as objects of both collateral and care.

How can Asian American Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies scholarship on the legacies of overseas empire take into account those who cannot be accounted for? The dominant visual and textual economies of its Operation Babylift have prioritized the stories of survivors through oral histories, journalistic coverage, and literary biography. Such genres privilege those who have—who were able to—survive in further shoring up the hegemonic epistemes of the human, the humane, the humanity, and the humanitarian. Instead, through a consideration of cardboard as an imperfect analytical vessel to desperately remember the babies who did not—who were unable to—survive, I am implicated in the always-impossible project of approximating what Neferti Tadiar calls the "remaindered life" of the War in Vietnam. A provocative poetics and politics on the "leftover practices and forms of living that remain superfluous to the production of valued, and even of disposable life," remaindered life "is not therefore simply an

object to be found, identified, exemplified."[7] Instead, it is a heuristic that gestures to "life that escapes valorization" by examining with experiments and experiences "that elude the codes of political and economic value that structure representation."[8]

Cardboard, then, constructs another cartography and chronology of empire. Rather than retrace the state-sanctioned pathways of the Vietnamese refugee as an ontological category that survives and is shaped by discursive processes of extinction, immigration, or assimilation, this dissertation charts their errant transits as an epistemology of excess and entropy. The labor and love of Asian American Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies have critically charted the transnational circuits of empire and its enterprise. Cherishing and contributing to this knowledge, in thinking entropically about empire, I directly draw from the scientific definition of "entropy" as a "measure of disorder or uncertainty in a system."[9] Put simply, I seek to index those inarticulate and indeterminate refuge(e) relations that exceed what Judith Butler calls the "frames of war," through which "we apprehend, or indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others."[10] However, whereas Butler toggles between these frames to focalize "a critique of the right to life" by thinking about "our responsibility *toward* those we do not know," I am instead interested in staying *within* the in-between gap wherein "lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (emphasis mine).[11] Amidst cardboard's flimsy ruins—whose prior inhabitants we *cannot* know—the discourses of rights, responsibility, and recognition reach their expiration date. Therefore, in tapping into the extra, extraneous, and excessive knowledges that have, quite literally, fallen through the cracks of these makeshift cribs, I instead orient myself to an entropic

[7] Neferti Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), xii
[8] Ibid.
[9] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2009), 1.
[10] Ibid, 15-36.
[11] Ibid.

engagement with Asian American Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies—wherein the Asian/American and refuge(e) are subjectless categories of residual refuse.

Literature Review: Asian American Studies

Emerging alongside the political formation of "Asian American,"[12] the field of Asian American Studies has provided a robust interdisciplinary framework continues to rigorously examine the titular category as a shifting formation of legal, economic, and cultural analysis in a broader struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. Analyzing how Asian/American populations have been racialized and gendered across regimes of exclusion/inclusion and extermination/emancipation, this body of scholarship has been intellectually vital in painstakingly tracing the manifold transits of migration and war across over the past two centuries.[13]

However, the category of Asian/American is not solely a homogenous legal, political, and economic category bounded by logics of militarisms and markets. Asian American Studies has also been deeply concerned with the co-constitutive role that culture plays—both in the continuation of but also contestation against military power. This turn to cultural studies has been deeply generative not only in demonstrating the centrality of cultural productions in normalizing war through rubrics of popularity and acceptability, but also in breaking open the very category of "Asian American" as an expansive terrain of epistemic contestation and contradiction in the cultivation of Asian American Studies as a strategy of *critique* rather than as

[12] Yuji Ichioka, Asian American Political Alliance, 1968.
[13] See Gary Okihiro, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2005) and Sucheng Chan, "Asian American Historiography," *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 3 (1996): 363-399.

a closed system that consolidates the Asian/American as a human(ized) subject made legible through recognition, citizenship, and agency.[14]

The offshoot of "subjectless critique" directly emerged from these materialist analyses of Asian American cultural productions and politics. Proposed and propagated by Kandice Chuh—drawing from the poststructuralist roots of Queer Theory[15]—who calls for "conceiving Asian American studies as a subjectless discourse," subjectless critique reveals how the subject "only becomes recognizable and can act as such by conforming to certain regulatory matrices."[16] In so doing, Chuh exposes the "centrality of citizenship" which has gravitationally constellated "Asian American studies' central concerns with representation and representational politics."[17] The call for subjectless critique, however, is not simply a disregard of the Asian American subject; it instead operates as a "a conceptual tool" of "strategic *anti*-essentialism" that "points to the need to manufacture 'Asian American' situationally."[18] Therefore, subjectlessness opens up another "discursive ground for Asian American studies"[19] whether above or below "the terrain of national culture"[20] that can serve as an experimental site to pollinate "practices of subjectivity that might not be immediately within" the "nation-based representational grid."[21] Overall, regardless of its inseparability from coinciding poststructuralist discourses in queer theory—

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[14] See Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe, *new formations, new questions: asian american* studies, *positions: east asia cultures critique* 5, no. 2 (1997); Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
[15] See David Eng and Jasbir Puar, "Introduction: Left of Queer," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 1-24 and Judith Butler, "Against Proper Objects, Introduction," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (1994): 1-26.
[16] Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.
[17] Ibid, 10.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, 11.
[20] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 2.
[21] Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 11.

which are less relevant concerns for the dissertation project—subjectless critique is nevertheless a vital reminder of the non-stability and non-solidity of who/what/where counts as "Asian American."

Literature Review: Critical Refuge(e) Studies

The interdisciplinary field of Critical Refuge(e) Studies has been guided by an enduring commitment to a humanist politics of recuperation in "centering refugee lives" in the retrieval of knowledge's "by and for refugees."[22] In my own mapping of the field over its past sixteen years, beginning with Yến Lê Espiritu's foundational journal article, the interdiscipline appears to be guided by two interlocking urgencies: the first a scholarly commitment to the formation of an institutionalized interdiscipline, the second a political orientation to recovering the refugee as a condition of subjectivity rather than subjugation.

This "critical" turn to the refugee figure is particularly apt given that the War in Vietnam prompted the largest number of migrations and resettlements that the United States had witnessed up until 1975.[23] The field has been generative in tracing the militarized and legalized formation of the "refugee," an eponymous figure coined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at its 1951 Convention.[24] In addition to Operation Babylift, interdisciplinary scholars of Critical Refuge(e) Studies have also constellated the Immigration Act of 1965, Indochina Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, Refugee Act of 1980, and Amerasian Act of 1987 as dramatic turning points in the larger landscape of U.S. immigration law and Asian

[22] Yến Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2022), 11.
[23] George Rupp, "The largest refugee resettlement effort in American history," International Rescue Committee, 2008.
[24] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The 1951 Convention Related to the Status of Refugee and Its 1967 Protocol*, 2011.

exclusion.[25] Even further, many practitioners of the interdiscipline have also navigated through the militarized and legalized interpolation of the refugee subject (as either deceased bodies in need of burial or destitute victims in need of rescue) by shifting towards memory, oral history, and literary fiction as creative and communal methods that center the lived subjectivities of those forcibly displaced.[26]

However, I am also concerned with how Critical Refuge(e) Studies may unintentionally shore up an exceptionalist understanding of empire as a predominantly U.S. enterprise. In tension with Asian American Studies, Critical Refuge(e) Studies emerged as a response to how "Vietnamese lives, histories, and politics" have "continue[d] to be peripheral to the" former in that the arrival of Vietnamese Americans became flattened under the generalizable and diversifying rubric of "Asian Americans."[27] But in starting with the ending of the War in Vietnam as a historical given, Critical Refuge(e) Studies may altogether construct another origin story in that the Vietnamese refugee appears as an already-arrived subject through her physical migration and discursive formation to and through the United States. In this linear historiography

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[25] For more information on legal policy and refugee resettlement, see Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

[26] To engage with academics, artists, and academics of Critical Refuge(e) Studies doing work on memory, oral history, and literary fiction, see Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, ed., *Re(Collecting) the Vietnam War*, *Asian American Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (2015); Isabelle Pelaud, *this is all i choose to tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Long Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York City: New York University Press, 2018); lê thi diem thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2003); Marguerite Nguyen, *America's Vietnam: The Longue Durée of U.S. Literature and Empire* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018); Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2021); Patricia Nguyen, "salt | water: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory and Statelessness at Sea," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1/2 (2017); Quan Tran, "Remembering the Boat People Exodus: A Tale of Two Memorials," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 3 (2012); and Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). Numerous grassroots community organization have also formed throughout these past two decades, including the Critical Refugee Studies Collective; Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network; Hai Bà Trưng School for Organizing, Progressive Vietnamese American Organization, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at University of California, Irvine; and Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive Oral History Project at Texas Tech University.

[27] Yến Lê Espiritu, "Introduction: Critical Refugee Studies and Asian American Studies," *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 1 (2021), 2.

of the War in Vietnam, wherein the Vietnamese victim is already relocated both geographically and epistemically, the refugee—as a political condition and as an embodied existence—is ontologically predetermined. Therefore, in this construction of the refugee as an inevitably lived subjectivity, analytics of race, gender, and sexuality become secondary characteristics that are simply inscribed onto the refugee body as embodied and evidentiary markers of war. Hence, I find that the turn to subjectless critique in Asian American Studies may pose fruitful for Critical Refuge(e) Studies.

There is a particular directionality to the progressive narrative of Critical Refuge(e) Studies, evident in its underlining grammatical economy of prepositions. To illustrate this grammatical logic, I engage three major touchpoints of the interdiscipline: "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship" (2006), *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (2014), and *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (2022). Altogether, these studies construct a telos to the racialized victim of war as she is interpellated as a refugee waiting for her various departures across landscapes and literatures.

In the first scholarly work that explicitly names the interdiscipline, Yến Lê Espiritu provides "critical attention" to how Vietnamese refugees "have been subject to intense scholarly interest," rendered and "overdocumented" as "objects of rescue" across the social sciences their operations by and for the federal government.[28] In the first half of the article, Espiritu examines the "crisis model" of late-20th century scholarship that inscribes and locates the deficiencies of war "not in the violent legacy" itself but instead "within the bodies and minds of the Vietnamese themselves."[29] These works, as she argues, "construct Vietnamese refugees as passive objects of

[28] Yến Lê Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study," 410.
[29] Ibid.

sympathy" waiting for "the West to 'assume an active role'" in their assimilation.[30] Operating from this research of the past, as an intellectual turning point of sorts, Espiritu calls for a titular scholarly shift *toward* a critical refuge(e) study. In the second half of the article, she seeks to "establish the diversity and vibrancy of Vietnamese American lives."[31] Here, rather than question the fraught formation of the refugee as a conceptual category in itself, Espiritu seeks to "imbue the term 'refugee' with social and political critiques."[32] In so doing, she crafts a clear timeline between the past of the War in Vietnam of the East and the present of Critical Refuge(e) Studies of the West. Having already arrived as refugee subjects of legal and academic scrutiny, Vietnamese victims of war prompt us "to remember Vietnam as a historical site, Vietnamese people as genuine subjects, and the Vietnam War as having its own integrity that is internal to the history and politics of Vietnam.[33]

In her sequential and seminal monograph, *Body Counts*, Espiritu elaborates upon the journal article, especially expanding upon the political focus on the "diversity and vibrancy of Vietnamese American lives" found in its second half. At the outset of *Body Counts*, Espiritu formalizes Critical Refuge(e) Studies as a field that "moves decisively away from the 'damage-centered' approach" of research.[34] Instead, shifting to "*desire* instead of damage" (emphasis original)[35]—à la Eve Tuck—Espiritu recenters the "lived lives"[36] of Vietnamese refugees from "'the margins of the past'" to reframe them as "'intentionalized beings' who possess and enact their own politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermath."[37] To do so, Espiritu

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[30] Ibid, 412.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid, 421.
[33] Ibid, 425-6.
[34] Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2014), 3.
[35] Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009), 416.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 11.

gestures to the vital speculative work of autoethnography, literary aesthetics, and oral history across her chapters, which altogether constitute this book as a commemorative "act of remembering—and remembrance."[38]

Having worked *toward* and arrived *at* Critical Refuge(e) Studies in the aftermath of the War in Vietnam, the departure points from which the field has mapped its manifold interventions have proliferated over the past half-decade. The majority of these interventions are situated within the context of the United States academy, in particular throughout the West Coast, as the desire to recuperate and remember refugee epistemologies has been extensively articulated for and against the institutional formations of the academy. Most recently, the Critical Refugee Studies Collective was co-founded by Espiritu in 2017 as a consortium supported by the University of California Multicampus Research Programs and Initiatives and predominantly shepherded by academics committed to "community-engaged scholarship" that "center[s] refugee lives—and the creative and critical potentiality that such lives offer."[39] In the introduction to a special issue of *Amerasia Journal* entitled "Critical Refugee Studies," Espiritu clearly identifies the field's intellectual import in the context of other academic disciplines. Here, she expresses how she is "disheartened that Vietnamese lives, histories, and politics continue to be peripheral to the field of Asian American studies"—not in that the War in Vietnam is disregarded in such scholarship, but that "their retelling of the war is more about Asian America than about Vietnam(ese)."[40] While identifying the field's compulsory Americanization of war and therefore its reductive hermeneutics of racialization, there is a way in which U.S. exceptionality is maintained in Espiritu's charge through a provincialization of how a specific

[38] Ibid, 23.
[39] Critical Refugee Studies Collective, "Who We Are," criticalrefugeestudies.com.
[40] Yến Lê Espiritu, "Introduction: Critical Refugee Studies," 2.

Vietnam(ese) quality epistemically constitutes the refugee and therefore Critical Refuge(e) Studies more broadly. Altogether, such constructions on the presence and existence of refugees and their lived lives have coalesced in the latest Critical Refuge(e) Studies anthology, aptly entitled *Departures*. As an urgent dispatch amidst the "present" refugee crisis, the book's epilogue is an invitational letter to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In it, they share a set of instructional demands for the organization "to treat refugees with respect and dignity."[41] Invoking "refugee agency," the appeal pushes the UNCHR "to firm up" its own "understanding of the refugee story" so as to "give it the heft, respect, dignity, and rigor" that is directed "toward presidents, nations, [and] the law."[42] The refugee, then, continues to be trafficked as a humanist category nearly four decades after the War in Vietnam: constantly waiting for her next departure and rearrival.

Conclusion

Altogether, the intertwined interdisciplinary formations of Asian American Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies stage a series of epistemic encounters that critically examine the enduring effects of empire. In a study of cardboard cribs and their unidentifiable infantile inhabitants, I am most immediately interested in, respectively, how corrugation can operate as a subjectless analytic of war and how the "refuge(e)" is an imprecise category in the study of Operation Babylift.

In tracing the micro-geographies of cardboard—its envelopments, its enclosures—this essay inhabits the indeterminant interim between the departure and arrival of the Vietnamese "refugee" so as to index another set of refuge(e) relations that are, of course, constructed by but

[41] Yến Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong, *Departures*, 144
[42] Ibid, 144-8.

can also confound the very processes of legal recognition and scholarly recuperation. In a way, rather than working laterally like Critical Refuge(e) Studies—across arrivals and departures—this essay mobilizes Marx's "method of descent," which David Harvey describes as a researcher "going down" and "looking for some foundational concepts."[43] Afterward, they "come back to the surface" and realize that "there is another way to interpret what's going on" once they can see "behind the world of appearance."[44] Therefore, in this underside of empire, where the entropic excesses linger outside and beyond the semantic fields of racialized subjugation and humanitarian rescue, I am interested in how race, gender, and sexuality are not additive features of proof—i.e., that they are not conceptual commodities embodied by Operation Babylift victims then transported to numerous places in the aftermath of empire.

Put simply, I am not interested in expanding the category of the "refugee" by thinking about the particular social formations of the racialized orphans as a neglected population. Such an analysis would paradoxically render another understanding of empire—and its analytical contours—as a coincidental effect of where and when a particular war was conducted. Instead, I examine how cardboard as a racializing, gendering, and sexualizing technology serves as a template that organizes the transnational production and circulation of militarized and marketized matters more broadly. Such shifting and stretching of archives and methods, may, at least tentatively, construct another cartography of empire—composed of different trails of the critical, of refuge(e), and of studies—that decenters the United States as the referent of Vietnamese refugee relations.

Overall, in what may be called a subjectless critical refuge(e) study, I think orthogonally from extant conceptions of the refugee as either "emergency or emerging identities"—peoples to

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[43] David Harvey, "Class 01 Reading Marx's Capital Vol I," *YouTube* (2007), 29:49
[44] Ibid.

be rescued by the state or romanticized as harbingers of the state's ongoing failure.[45] In decentering the United States in an entropic and expansive study of the War in Vietnam, I do not simply trace other Vietnamese refugee migrations to Western allies including Australia, Canada, and France nor to Eastern sites such as Japan and China. A more expansive analysis of empire, as figured in this essay, is not a series of additional refugee transits. Rather, empire is an enfolding enterprise that is constantly enveloping upon itself. These cardboard cribs—discarded, disregarded, and decomposed—index the non-official, non-human refugee relations that continue to linger amidst wastelands, waterways, and wreckages.

Transnational Adoption

Introduction & "Intervention"

The War in Vietnam prompted an international humanitarian crisis of care over racialized children. As one of the most televised wars in American history, the visual memory of the War in Vietnam is replete with a paradoxical range of images—from tender candids of American G.I.s playing with village kids to terrible cover-ups of torture—that, regardless of content and form, render the Vietnamese child as an object onto which to project a politics of rehabilitation and restoration in the rationalization of the War's end.

Such infantile fascinations reached a fever pitch during the Fall of Saigon in 1975, when Gerald Ford allocated two million dollars to create a special foreign aid children's fund to arrange adoption collaborations between orphanages in South Vietnam and resettlement camps, churches, and adoption agencies back home. On April 4th—just one day after the presidential

[45] Peter Nyers, "Emergency or Emerging Identities? Refugees and Transformation in World Order," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 1 (1999), 1.

order—Operation Babylift was conducted.[46] After relocating and resettling close to three thousand children, journalistic media coverage on the successes and failures of transnational adoption skyrocketed across major magazines and news publications including *Newsweek*, *Psychology Today*, *Science Digest*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times* among many more.[47]

Regardless of their political bent in celebrating or condemning the transportation of Vietnamese children, the earliest accounts of Operation Babylift have been constructed in discursive frames that center the anxieties of U.S. empire and its various agents—government officials, veterans, medical personnel, and nuclear families. In this way Vietnamese children, as direct offspring of the War, became a collateralized population afforded only contingent forms of care. Transnational adoption fertilized a racialized reproductive regime that married domestic, humanitarian, and imperial desires in reinforcing while also recasting the United States as an interracial "home" for (the) refuge(e). The guardianship of U.S. empire became legally codified with the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987, allowing mixed (primarily half-white) Vietnamese children—deemed "aliens"—to apply for immigrant visas if their fathers were U.S. citizens.

In these nearly five decades of familial reunification (as adoption anniversaries are still organized today by agencies such as the Pan Am Museum Foundation, Holt International, and the Vietnam Veterans of America), the catastrophic conditions for children during the War in Vietnam continue to be abated or abandoned altogether through the consolations of citizenship. Through this literature review on transnational adoption, I seek to understand the paradoxical

[46] Crucial humanitarian organizations include Holt International Children's Services, Friends of Children of Viet Nam, and Catholic Relieve Service—all which helped to coordinate the airlifts using commercial and military aircraft.

[47] Andrea Warren, "Operation Babylift and the Adoption of Vietnamese Orphans: The Coverage Given by Four American Magazines, 1975-1976" (Master of Arts thesis), School of Journalism at the University of Kansas (1983).

logics that went into the ideation and implementation of Operation Babylift: what seems to be a reactive mixture between liberal and imperial impulses in the lethal production of care qua cargo. At the same time, a consideration on the cardboard box as a standardized economic unit of militarisms further complicates these transits of imperial intimacies. As I plan to elaborate, the international issue of transnational adoption was not limitlessly catalyzed by ethical and emotional aspirations but were also limitedly confounded by economic restrictions of limited supply in the midst of high demand.

Literature Review: Transnational Adoption

In the wake of war, circuits of transnational adoption from Asia to America have generated "new geographies of kinship" based on the racialized, gendered, and aged rubrics of empire.[48] Tracing back to post-World War II, transnational adoption emerged as a reactive measure to mediate the devastations of war, quickly becoming a defining feature of the long Cold War period. Mediated between contestatory rationales of international accountability and interracial anxiety, adoption was a central mechanism in maintaining U.S. relations with the so-called "East."

Altogether, the apparatus of transnational adoption produced a set of ontological divisions between the parental West and the prenatal East. In her longitudinal study of Asian adoption, Catherine Choy categorizes the United States as the "International Adoption Nation"—a nucleus around which the process of "global family making" has gravitated since the mid-20th century.[49] International adoption from Asia, Choy describes, has become a "socially acceptable,

[48] Toby Alice Volkman, "Introduction: New Geographies of Kinship" in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Volkman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-22.
[49] Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Global Families: A History of International Adoption in America* (New York City: New York University Press, 2013), 9.

if not desirable, way to create a family" amidst contemporary U.S. multiculturalism. In *Framed by War*, Susie Woo dramatizes the "family frame" as a discursive technology that rendered Korean children "crucial to the transnational making of American empire in the early Cold War."[50] As the "ideal representatives of US-South Korea relations" who embodied reconciliation and reunification as "deserving objects of rescue" in the aftermath of the Korean War," these children of empire modified the "Cold War script" into "the framework of care and kin, not violence and force."[51] Other scholarship on the Korean War, oftentimes declared as the origins of international adoption, includes Arissa Oh's *To Save the Children of Korea*, Eleana Kim's *Adopted Territory*, and SooJin Pate's *From Orphan to Adoptee*.

Moving into the War in Vietnam, directly yet distinctly emerging alongside the increasingly normalized legal definitions of the immigrant or refugee, the Vietnamese "adoptee" figured as a conjunctural analytical category amidst the constellation of laws permitting Asian migration, including the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, Refugee Act of 1980, and Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987. Jodi Kim shifts this analytical frame to conduct a comparative adoption study between the children of the Korean War and the War in Vietnam, wherein she surfaces the "war orphan" as a transhistorical figure "upon which the Manichean anticommunism of the cold war—as at once a geopolitics and 'good will' structure of feeling—condenses and coheres."[52]

International adoption from Asia likewise remains a significant structure in the ongoing global organization of military, monetary, and marital relations during the 21st century. Studying China/U.S. adoption relations as the "largest transnational movement of adopted children"

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[50] Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US* Empire (New York City: New York University Press, 2019), 5.
[51] Ibid, 12.
[52] Jodi Kim, "An 'Orphan' with Two Mothers," 860.

throughout the early 2000s, Sara Dorow examines how Chinese adoptees "insistently" evoke "the raced and gendered relations by which individual, family, and national identities are produced and negotiated" in the further consolidation of the U.S. empire across the past half-century. At the same time, Dorow's study differs in historical and thus archival scope. Situated amidst "conditions of social citizenship in the late capitalist" interregnum, Dorow moves away from centering the "behaviors and attitudes of individual adoptees" in the study of migrant assimilation and adjustment.[53] Chinese adoptees, she clarifies, complicate existing case studies of transnational adoption because they "are granted automatic citizenship in the bosom of white middle-class America."[54] Nonetheless, Asian adoption as a whole poses "impossible contradictions of belonging," as their presence "in domestic America demands reckoning with liminality, especially at the busy intersections where internal relations of race and capital meet trans-Pacific practices of exchange."[55]

Conclusion

In this network of Asian adoption, the circulation of children generated a transnational economy of care. Evident in the adoptive arrangements shaped by both institutions and individuals, "care" is a non-innocuous materialist analytic of militarisms. Aligning with Michelle Murphy's "cautions against equating care with positive feelings," I therefore continue the critical genealogy of transnational adoption studies to consider care as a familial and financial concern that cannot be uncoupled from the history of empire.[56] In the case of the Operation Babylift

[53] Sara K. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 3.
[54] Ibid, 8.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Michelle Murphy, "Unsettling Care: Troubling Transnational Itineraries of Care in Feminist Health Practices," *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (2015), 665-690.

bassinets, the divisions between care and cargo—as objects to protect and profit from—are prone to perforation.

Transpacific Militarisms and the Cold War

Introduction & "Intervention"

Unpacking the numerous scales and strategies of U.S. imperial power, studies in transpacific militarisms and the Cold War have been crucial in denaturalizing empire as a geographically and temporally bounded object of analysis. Likewise, this dissertation project stretches cardboard as transpacific analytic—starting with the end of the War in Vietnam and spanning backward to World War II and forward to contemporary crises in supply chain shortages and environmental destruction—to put forth a theory of empire as a still enfolding structure.

As a ubiquitous material, a standardized unit of militarisms and markets in the global circuits of racial capitalism, the cardboard box is a tangible index related to war. Yet as an innocuous material, an inanimate object scattered across porches and stuffed into recycling bins, the cardboard box is also an intangible non-index unrelated to war. Reckoning with, without resolving, these contradictory affective and analytical orientations to cardboard, I seek to modestly contribute to studies of transpacific empire as a "history of the present" characterized by everyday epistemic entanglement and enmeshment.[57] Aligning with Foucault's analytical shift from archaeology to genealogy, I engage the everydayness of cardboard as a material of mundane militarisms that necessitates experimental modes of historical analysis that facilitate the very "revaluing of values"—to trouble what is taken as a given today. In this way, history is

[57] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York City: Pantheon, 1977).

therefore "no longer" a product "of tradition, of tracing a line" and is instead a process of scribbling, of sketching out "several pasts" that will inevitably "break with themselves" as their very "present undergoes change."[58] These intellectual and political commitments to historical contingency have been generously and generatively modeled across transpacific studies, an interdisciplinary field that continues to grapple with the ongoing relevance of empire.

Literature Review: Transpacific Militarisms and the Cold War

Tracing the transnational exchanges in culture, capital, and labor of geopolitical struggles across Asia and the Pacific Islands, scholars such as Epeli Hau'ofa, Jodi Kim, and Lisa Yoneyama have troubled the state-sanctioned construction of the "Pacific Rim Region" as a discretely defined site of U.S. diplomacy. In the critical reuptake of World War II and the midcentury, rather than an index of a particular temporality or typology of war, the Cold War was more than a punctuated period of a particular U.S. policy to be bracketed between 1945 and 1989. Instead, the Cold War functions as a misnomer—an epistemological conundrum of misnaming, misremembering, and misinterpreting.[59] As Sunny Xiang aptly puts it, "Where the Cold War is a historical event, the cold war is a historiographic problem."[60] Whether capitalized or lowercased, the c/Cold w/War as an epistemology rather than an event was a critical contribution in the reconceptualization of transpacific militarisms.

As an epistemology, the long Cold War could otherwise be considered a *process* of rewiring the methods of historical narration in reconsidering the spatial and temporal contours of empire. Troubling and texturizing analytical frameworks of exception and emergency, critical

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[58] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), 3-5.
[59] See Petrus Liu, "Cold War as Method," *Prism* 16, no. 2 (2019): 408-431.
[60] Sunny Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2020), 3.

studies on the Cold War have turned to the prolific aesthetical, political, and social practices of militarized subjects as a way to rethink war as a condition of everyday life—empire as a structure of contestation rather than totalization.[61] Shifting between the granular and structural scales of empire, the squishy and slippery category of the "transpacific" emerges from this scholarship as a mobile analytic that tracks the heterogeneous knowledge formations that "expose[], question[], but sometimes also sustain[]" hegemonic Cold War logics of rights-based justice, citizenship, reparations, and the nation state.[62]

Yet, engagement with the Cold War as an episteme through its many enumerations of the "transpacific" has nonetheless renaturalized a particular genealogy and geography of Asia-Pacific relations that have obscured Pacific Islander histories. Rather than just secondary testing sites and stepping stones of nuclear militarization, the Pacific Islands are vital epistemological and experiential sites to consider in a more comprehensive understanding of the Cold War and the reach of transpacific empire.[63] In this way, there has been a turn within the very term of transpacific, therefore unsettling intellectual formations that have actualized Asian American

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[61] See Christine Hong, *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Keith Camacho, *Cultures of Commemoration: The Politics of War, Memory, and History in the Mariana Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Moon-Ho Jung, *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the US Security State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); and Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

[62] Lisa Yoneyama, "Introduction: Transpacific Cold War Formations and the Question of (Un)Redressability" in *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1-39.

[63] Aanchal Saraf, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Candace Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future: Kanaka Maoli and Critical Settler Cartographies in Hawai'i* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Erin Suzuki, *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021); and Candace Fujikane, James Clifford and Stacey Kamehiro, "From the Edge through the Vā: Introduction to "Pacific Island Worlds: Oceanic Dis/Positions," *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* 22, no. 1 (2022): 4-19; and Maile Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

Studies and Critical Refuge(e) Studies as extant interdisciplines. Mapping a "decolonial genealogy" of the transpacific, Lisa Yoneyama reflects on "what elements, practices, and questions are left out" of the term while it "gain[s] increasing currency" across the academy.[64] In turn, she recommends that we continue redefining "the ever enabling yet perilous prefix *trans*."[65] The "transpacific" therefore expands: not just an adjectival modifier that provincializes empire, but a historiographic method that stretches it into an analytical structure of "entanglement."[66] As an entangling episteme, then, the transpacific entwines colonialism and imperialism—a framework elastic enough to hold and honor "Indigenous Pacific epistemologies and experiences" in the collective commitment to demilitarization and decolonization across Oceania more broadly.[67]

Conclusion

The various roots and routes of critical transpacific studies have mapped a vital genealogy of intellectual recursivity and reflexivity. Without stabilizing the transpacific as a "semiotic and conceptual possession of an entire region," my study of empire as an enfolding episteme seeks to pluralize understandings of the War in Vietnam and its ongoing aftermath by tracing the oceanic transits of the cardboard box and its infantile inhabitants.[68] Thinking through the textures of the transpacific will be particularly crucial in the third chapter, where I seek to blueprint an impossible cartography of the children and their detours and destinations across the

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[64] Lisa Yoneyama, "Toward a Decolonial Genealogy of the Transpacific," *American Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2017), 471.
[65] Ibid, 480.
[66] Yên Lê Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama, "Transpacific Entanglements" in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, edited by Cathy Schlund-Vials, (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2017), 175-189.
[67] Julianna Anesi, Alfred P. Flores, et al., "(Re)centering Pacific Islanders in Trans-Pacific Studies: Transdisciplinary Dialogue, Critique, and Reflections from the Diaspora," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021).
[68] Arif Dirlik and Rob Wilson, eds., *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

Philippines, Guam, and Hawai'i as products to be arrived or aborted altogether. Yên Lê Espiritu conducts a similar remapping project of the Vietnamese refugee, a figure through which she updates Critical Refuge(e) Studies via Native Studies to synthesize what she calls a "transpacific critique." However, in this case, rather than sketch a "refugee itinerary"—a travel genre that presumes the linear progression between departure and arrival—I turn to the ephemeral materiality of the cardboard box as a transportable object inevitably prone to ripping, rotting, and ruining. In this way, the traces of cardboard's residue and remains compose a different set of transpacific entanglements through its enfolding transits and transitions.

Discard Studies and New Materialisms

Introduction & "Intervention"

Given its multiple spatial and temporal configurations across various lifespans, cardboard is a protean material that continues to linger in its many isotopic forms as a contemporary archive of militarisms. In addition to its low cost of production, the cardboard box was heralded for its recyclability and reusability by government officials and commissioned scientists who strove for an ecofriendly enterprise of "environmentally sustainable logistics."[69] By no means reducing, and despite recycling and reusing, cardboard continues to permeate the polluted present given its conditional biodegradability.

Inheriting and inhabiting the destructive ecological legacies of U.S. empire, I turn to the nascent interdisciplinary field of Discard Studies to conduct a new materialist study of cardboard and its vital properties as "vibrant matter" that has the capacity "to animate, to act, to produce

[69] Headquarters at the Department of the Army, "ATP 3-34.5/MCRP 4-11B: Environmental Considerations" (Washington, D.C., 2022), 36.

effects dramatic and subtle."[70] Rather than interpreting the contemporary climate "crisis" as a totalizing and finalized epoch, I am committed to a less, or non-, anthropogenic account of empire's ecologies; instead of how we weather war (after waging it), I am more interested in a syntactical shift to the "weather of war" as an epistemic construction of militarism more concerned with environmental entanglements of earthly—not just human—relations.

The cardboard box is not simply an inanimate commodity that has accumulated over time, flatly existing as quantifiable proof of pollution. Instead, cardboard unfolds across a span of different shapes, surfaces, and substances. Whether putrefied, undissolved, or refurbished altogether, cardboard's shifting states of matter are critical to trace in a study of U.S. empire and its ongoing aftermath—not as an abstracted ontological given, but as an asymmetrical process still actively unfolding and enfolding at an everyday scale of different textures and terrains.

In turning to Discard Studies, I am drawn to its experimental ethos as a nascent interdiscipline still figuring out its methodological and archival contours. Of course, although the waste of war could be and has been examined through anthropological, literary, and sociological lenses—thus perhaps pointing to the redundancy of "Discard Studies" as another intellectual formation—even its nominal distinction of "discard," as a noun and a verb, seems meaningful. Rather than taking waste as an already-existing primary object of study, the field is instead interested in the messier task of following the unending process of how "waste comes to be."[71]

This project on cardboard likewise orients itself around this epistemic conundrum. By identifying the cardboard box as a vital infrastructure of the War in Vietnam, I do not mean to simply add onto the index of militarized technologies used during the period. Instead, by tracing how cardboard has been discarded and disregarded in the memory of war, I am instead

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[70] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6..
[71] "What is Discard Studies?" Discard Studies, discardstudies.com.

concerned with the epistemological stakes of how the material is both ubiquitous yet understated in the study of war.

Literature Review: Discard Studies

Discard Studies is guided by an analysis of the distribution of power and its equilibrium: "What must be discarded for this or that system to be created and to carry on?"[72] That which is discarded is otherwise known as waste, which does not necessarily denote as litter or trash but instead operates as a Foucauldian "technique of power" which "'produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.'"[73]

An analysis of waste as structural to rather than symptomatic of racial capitalism—its process rather than product—is central to the current scholarship's endeavor to trace the co-constitutive relationship between environmental destruction, colonialism, and imperialism. In *Pollution Is Colonialism*, Max Liboiron seeks to define pollution not as the consequence of "climate change" and instead as "the violence of colonial land relations."[74] In these structuralist accounts on the organizational capacity of waste, most of the Discard Studies literature derives from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, urban studies, environmental science, and economics. Through particular case studies mainly based in the United States, these texts approach waste as an empirical reality built by governmental procedures of resource allocation and risk in the management of precarious—often racialized—populations.[75]

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[72] Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky, *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022), 3.
[73] Ibid, 4.
[74] Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is* Colonialism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 6.
[75] See Donovan Webster, *Aftermath: The Remnants of War* (New York City: Vintage, 1998); Edmund Russel, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Richard Porter, *The Economics of Waste* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 2022).

Coterminous with these structuralist examinations of waste as a *system* arise more granular accounts of how everyday *subjects* move through this system. Theorizing a "new direction in discard studies," Justin Chun-Him Lau points to how extant "research on waste tends to exclude ways to live with the waste materials" themselves.[76] Lau draws from feminist science and technology studies to elucidate how these lived epistemologies reroute Discard Studies through an analytical framework of care attuned to the "stewardship," not subjugation, of waste.[77] This humanist turn seeks to accommodate ways of how to manage the very management of waste. One text includes Min Hyoung Song's *Climate Lyricism*, where he observes how "[c]limate change operates in a temporality that is not synchronous with human habits of thinking about time and in a space that is not commensurate with human inhabitation."[78] With this spatiotemporal disjunction, Song turns to the lyric as a transitory genre that decenters the first-person "I" and its "profound psychic interior"; it instead functions as a "minor" gesture of simple "attunement to the everyday in original, and often-estranging, ways" through which we become "more aware of the extraordinary that is all around."[79] Likewise, Arseli Dokumaci approaches contemporary activism by disabled populations as performative acts through which they "enact and bring into being the worlds that are not already available to them" by recovering "the reciprocal properties of the organism and the environment"[80]

Literature Review: New Materialisms

[76] Justin Chun-Him Lau, "Towards a care perspective on waste: A new direction in discard studies," *Environment and Planning C Politics and Space* 0, no. 0 (2022), 1-17.
[77] Ibid, 12
[78] Min Hyoung Song, *Climate Lyricism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 3.
[79] Ibid, 5.
[80] Arseli Dokumaci, *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 5.

As an outgrowth from these stems of humanist scholarship on environmental afterlives, there is another garden of research on new materialisms blooming from cultural studies, animal studies, and disability studies which seeks to trouble the very ontological properties of waste as an everyday humanist structure. Perhaps adjacent to and not directly under the banner of Discard Studies, this work on new materialisms is effusive and experimental, offering a set of analytical, artistic, and albeit sometimes abstract gestures that trouble the "human" as a central category of thinking and doing. Through a new materialist lens, everyday objects—otherwise innocuous, inanimate, and inconsequential—are imbued with epistemological vitality as indexes of the growing entanglement between earthly relations.

Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Matter, and Queer Affect* is a representative and brilliant text on relations otherwise discarded. Interrogating the "fragile division between animate and inanimate"—rather than the humanist rubric of "life"—as a means to "rewrite conditions of intimacy," Chen seeks to cultivate a "messy biopolitical imbroglio" that denaturalizes "national bodies" of citizenship, governmentality, and populations as dominant sources of knowledge.[81] Tending to objects, Chen does not describe them as "undifferentiated matter" but instead as "indeed humanized notions" that both animate and are animated.[82] Other texts constellating animate relations include Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter*, wherein titular plastic "is not just any material but is emblematic of material relations"—a metonym for plasticity—between the "body, subjectivity, media, [and] infrastructure."[83] Yuriko Furuhata's *Climatic Media* is also an incisive and inventive study that complicates why matter matters. Complicating the politics of what could be called "global warming" across Asia, Furuhata

[81] Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 1-7.
[82] Ibid, 7.
[83] Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 1-16.

instead turns to the eponymous archive of climatic media, composed of "technologies of atmospheric control" across transpacific knowledge systems of architecture, meteorology, digital computing, and environmental art. These epistemic interfaces altogether index what Furuhata names as "thermostatic desire," a "technophilic desire" which approaches the "atmosphere itself as an object of calibration, control, and engineering."[84]

In troubling the ontological properties of matter, these new material studies experiment with alternative ways of working with waste as a constantly reshaping analytic. These studies oftentimes evoke the sensorium as quotidian registers of knowledge production. In *The Smell of Risk*, Hsuan Hsu thinks through "a set of aesthetic problems arising at the intersection of olfaction and environmental risk."[85] Cataloguing between different respiratory registers of breathing, inhaling, and suffocating, Hsu is interested in how "the sense of smell is a widely available"—and highly sensitive—"resource for detecting unfamiliar and potentially dangerous materials in the atmosphere."[86] In other words, as Jean-Thomas Tremblay explains, "Breathing is inevitably morbid."[87] "To be a breather is to be vulnerable," and in this way attention to the automatic "respiratory process" as an involuntary archive points to how "life and death loop into each other as on a Möbius strip."[88] The turn to olfaction as a minor method of analysis, then, is an inevitably and vitally necessary strategy amidst the permeation of environmental risk and thus the uneven distribution—and inhalation—of precarity. In his text, Hsu tracks "the denigration of smell in Western aesthetics" and in turn offers olfaction as a "sensory alternative" to the visual as

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[84] Yuriko Furuhata, *Climatic Media: Transpacific Experiments in Atmospheric Control* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 1-2.
[85] Hsuan Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (New York City: New York University Press, 2020), 5.
[86] Ibid, 5
[87] Jean-Thomas Tremblay, *Breathing Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 1.
[88] Ibid.

a hegemonic epistemological mode.[89] Other sensorial registers of engaging animacies include the gustatory,[90] haptic,[91] and sonic[92]: altogether the sensorium operates as a mundane methodology and strategy of interacting with matter in innocuous yet also imaginative ways that are attuned to the particularities of people, places, and things otherwise discarded and disregarded.

Another strand of this scholarship on new materialisms includes a peculiar conglomeration of feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS) research attuned to the molecular and microbial composition of matter. Interested in rhizomes and tentacles and matrices, this body of work is provocative in its bold gestures of multispecies lifeworlds, wherein the molecule mitotically binds everything at an atomic level. One controversial text is Donna Haraway's latest monograph, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, where she studies string figures and scientific fictions to reframe ecological devastation as a Chthulucene rather than an Anthropocene, an epistemic shift somewhere beyond/between the human-posthuman divide, instead preferencing multispecies relations over humanistic rubrics of justice, solidarity, and accountability.[93] Given their scalar focus on the molecular, compared to the previously cited literature on new materialisms, I consider this feminist STS scholarship to be less interested in the actual materiality of the material itself.

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[89] Hsuan Hsu, *The Smell of* Risk, 6-20. 0

[90] See Anita Mannur, *Intimate Eating: Racialized Spaces and Radical Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022); Heather Paxson, *Eating beside Ourselves: Thresholds of Foods and Bodies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023); and Hi'ilei Hobart, *Cooling the Tropics: Ice, Indigeneity, and Hawaiian Refreshment* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2022).

[91] See Aanchal Saraf, "'This poison is going to kill the world': The Atomization of Nuclear Fallout in Marshallese Narrations of Displacement, Birth, and Burial" (conference paper), Global Asias 6, Penn State University (2023); Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); and Vivian Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

[92] See James Steintrager and Rey Chow, *Sound Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Jessica Schwartz, *Radiation Sounds: Marshallese Music and Nuclear Sciences* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); and Tao Leigh Goffe, "Listening Underwater: Silence as Fermentation," *Shift Space* (2022).

[93] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Conclusion

Altogether, this budding scholarship on Discard Studies and New Materialisms pluralizes our engagements with waste. Attuning to the distinct—though not disconnected—temporalities of discarding, decaying, and decomposing cultivates an analytical sensitivity in reencountering the archive of cardboard as a vital material that remains crucial to remembering the ongoing afterlife of the War in Vietnam. Likewise, these latest studies on new materialisms serve as experimental models of kaleidoscopic reading practices on the animacies of matter that thus reanimate our political and poetic orientations to an otherwise once innocuous material of cardboard. Collapsing any form of ontological predetermination, new materialisms research is an existential exercise that expands our ecological and epistemological horizons, offering other opportunities to think about and live through what's already ongoing.

III. Chapter Outlines

Procedural Comments

The study of cardboard and its centrality in the production of an enfolding U.S. empire inevitably collapses the disciplinary folds that have separated histories of transnational adoption and military logistics. Working across fraught disciplinary seams, this dissertation is itself corrugated in structure, imbricating seemingly disparate methods and archives. Overlapping the War in Vietnam with a seemingly innocuous and irrelevant history of packaging, this dissertation narrates the standardized manufacture of racialized kinship relations as familial but also fiscal projects of empire in the construction of intimacy qua commodity. The simultaneous site of subsistence but also subsidization, these cardboard boxes are materials to carry and to care for—the synergistic mechanisms necessary for the constant regeneration of U.S. empire.

Considering the many creases, corners, and crevices of cardboard, the chapters of this dissertation are organized as a booklet of instructions that can be read out of order. Whereas a proper manual narrates the linear actualization of a final product, this dissertation—a faulty manual of sorts—diagrams the object's inevitable deconstruction and decomposition. In corrugating the very structure of the dissertation, I seek to expose the ongoing flimsiness and therefore failure of U.S. empire by juxtaposing the teleological and accumulative logics of global supply chain production with the recursive and rhizomatic lifespan of corrugated cardboard as a compound prone to perforation and corrosion. The cardboard box, as indexed in this dissertation, is not a stable structure. Rather, it is a residual material: collapsible and convertible in the regeneration of alternative ecologies and epistemologies. A collection of scraps, these chapters reside in cardboard's residues across the afterlife of war.

Step 1 / Chapter 1

This first chapter—tentatively entitled "Constructing the Container: Cardboard's Corrugation"—conducts a comparative analysis between two sets of cardboard boxes: the lunchboxes crafted for U.S. Army soldiers throughout World War II with the cardboard cribs of Operation Babylift. Specifically, I look at the Meal, Combat, Individual (MCI) kits that were designed to "modernize soldier rations"[94] in the metabolic management of militarisms. Here, I mobilize the feminist methodology of "critical juxtaposition" from Critical Refuge(e) Studies to examine the 20th century history of military logistics and its epistemic centrality in the production of racialized transnational adoptees. In particular, I look at the *form* of the cardboard box by examining governmental memoranda from the Office of the Quartermaster General, a

[94] Frontier Army Museum, "A Brief History of U.S. Army Rations," U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2021.

governmental branch in charge of the providing supplies to the army, which collaborated with materials science engineers and financial consultants in order to optimize the production of the lunchboxes. In so doing, I elaborate how these logics were then replicated and further refined in the quantitative management of Vietnamese orphans as objects to be efficiently packaged and shipped. Thinking about the cardboard lunchbox and cradle as nested structures (rather than replacements of one after the other), I reconstruct the contiguity of the corrugated cardboard box as a standardized unit in the intergenerational and international reproduction of militarisms and markets.

Step 2 / Chapter 2

In chapter two—tentatively entitled "Calculating the Contents: Care as Disposable Cargo"—I turn from the *form of* to the *contents within* the cardboard box. Here, my historical period is the same as the first chapter, though my specific archives are different. To examine the contents of the lunchboxes and cardboard cribs—military rations and babies, respectively—I look at the scientific reports of nutritional food scientists and medical doctors who were central to approximating the vital logics that determined what and how much cardboard could contain. Both sets of scientists, dieticians for the lunchboxes and pediatricians for the cribs, engaged in shared quantitative rationalizations of risk and thus calculated disposability of materials, whether comestible or infantile. Here, I examine how the underlining biopolitical logics of military logistics in the bioregulation of the soldier and the Vietnamese orphan amidst times of active war. Modifying and measuring the success/failure of cardboard through quantitative rubrics of thickness, heaviness, and wetness, the contents of each box—whether a lunchbox or bassinet—could never surpass the scientific as well as economic limits of its form. In this way, subsistence

became the prevailing logics in the management of both comestible and infantile products. For example, for the meal kits, the Department of Defense conducted an annual study to identify a cardboard box capable of "achieving an optimum container weight with resultant cost savings" to "accommodate more meals" while being "less expensive."[95] Likewise, Operation Babylift became a matter of economic optimization: Similar to the lunchboxes, each bassinet was tightly packed, with two to three babies adjacently crammed "on their sides" to (1) accommodate as much cargo as possible and to (2) "aspirate" them in case they choked on their own vomit after sharing baby bottles, drinking diluted formula, and inhaling fecal remnants.[96]

Step 3 / Chapter 3

For the third chapter—tentatively entitled "Carrying the Cargo: A Cartography of Care"—I trace the crisscrossing transits of these cardboard cribs, which were packaged and delivered to various militarized sites including Australia, France, Germany, Canada, and mainly the United States. Despite these destinations to the West, along the way numerous Operation Babylift flights made emergency landings to U.S. colonies including the Philippines, Guam, and Hawai'i due to engine failure, lethal fetal sickness, or emptied supplies. Although most of the Vietnamese children were successfully delivered to the United States, specifically at Camp Pendleton, this chapter sketches a speculative cartography of the errant transits of Operation Babylift due to U.S. government's egregious and erroneous policies. Gathering documentary photographs, memos from Immigration and Naturalization Service, and verbal testimonies from Operation Babylift volunteers, this chapter charts the extensive destinations—but also the

[95] Carol Norton, "Performance Testing of Fiberboard Shipping Containers," Soldier Systems Center, U.S. Army Soldier and Biological Chemical Command, 2000, ii.
[96] Frederick Burkle, Jr., "Operation Babylift: Delivering a Nameless Cargo to Freedom, Part II," *Military Medicine* 182, no. 9-10 (2017), 1680-2.

eventual declinations—of the cardboard box across various camp sites. The durability of cardboard indexes not only extraordinary duress to which Vietnamese children were subject but also the elaborate detours of transpacific militarisms as the U.S. government constellated a network of colonial "checkpoints" to mediate its operations.

Step 4 / Chapter 4

Lastly, for this fourth chapter—tentatively entitled "Converting the Crap: Cardboard's Spoiling and Salvaging"—I study the deformity, disposability, and degradability of cardboard as a "living" material. Here, I examine "what comes after" its uniform production within the global management of militarisms and markets. In methodological contrast to the first two chapters, here I conduct a new materialist analysis of cardboard. As an imperfect substance prone to creasing and crumpling and collapsing, an analytical study of cardboard is also a creative practice of reconstructing alternative epistemologies on the imbricated relationships between the animate and inanimate matter. Peering through perforations and punctures, I practice a speculative literary method in revisiting and revisualizing the well-circulated photographs of Operation Babylift, engaging the experimental science fiction film entitled *The Tree House* (2019) by Trương Minh Quý, and indexing the lived practices of Vietnamese villager women waste workers as remaindered laborers who are not governmentally acknowledged. Through these close readings, I conjure how the "children of cardboard" can convert collapsed boxes into different geometries and geographies of care amidst the ongoing afterlife of the War in Vietnam.

In this theoretical chapter, I contemplate the contemporary conjuncture, which is marked by what Frantz Fanon calls "tinctures of decay"[24] as cardboard faces a supply shortage and continues to slowly decompose in landfills and oceanic garbage patches. Here, I engage in

ecocriticism—with a particular orientation to Discard Studies—regarding discourses of "apocalypse" and "crisis" to contemplate the ongoing global struggle over cardboard as a substance of simultaneous contamination but also creation. I also turn to Queer Theory as a generative space to think about the contradictions of futurity vis-à-vis the utopic, dystopic, and heterotopic.

Disposable and decomposable, how does cardboard and its recycling (from ferrying ammo to fostering adoptees), followed by its discarding (once the ammo and the adoptees are unloaded), not only contain a theory of slow violence but also expose the corrugated and therefore collapsible structure of U.S. militarism? How does cardboard enfold another array of transpacific entanglements of racialized deformity and degradability? Accepting the fatal/vital fact that the decomposition of cardboard is slower than its production, this section articulates the mundane methodology of wading and waiting in waste—to reside in residue—as the only ordinary means of an otherwise, wherein the present is the only other possibility itself.

Warranty Statement

Through this kaleidoscopic consideration of cardboard as a mundane material of militarisms and markets, I attune to the material, metaphysical, and metonymic function of cardboard as a messy substance of kinship in the study of empire and its supply chain of care as cargo in the ongoing aftermath of the War in Vietnam. I disclaim that this dissertation—like the history of cardboard—will be "untidy" given the inevitably "strange conjunctures of capitalism and trade" that architect American empire.[97] Confronted with the material debris of empire, I engage the "ruin" of cardboard not as "inert remains" leftover after imperial violence, but rather

[97] Laleh Khalili, "Introduction" in *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (New York City: Verso Books, 2021), 15-21.

as "residues and remnants" of "vital refiguration" that "condense alternative senses of history" across "multiple historical tenses."[98] By studying cardboard boxes—whether as cribs or lunchboxes or trash or art—as archival palimpsests of each other, I reckon with war not as a series of battles, financial statistics, or temporal periodizations. Rather, I reconstruct the "polygonal or polyhedral" architecture of imperialism, which "can never properly be taken as finite,"[99] as a geometric analytic through which we can acknowledge the reproductive capacities of empire but can also attune to its imperfect folds, wrinkles, and rips—as sites of effuse care and as signs of its eventual collapse.

IV. Proposed Timeline

Fall 2022 in New Haven, CT | 2/2 Semester of Second Year
- Prospectus Workshop seminar
- Teaching Fellow assignment (1/4)
- Last official semester of coursework

Spring 2023 in New Haven, CT | 1/2 Semester of Third Year
- Prospectus colloquium in April
- Teaching Fellow assignment (2/4)
- Create oral examination lists
- Additional coursework for WGSS and ER&M

Fall 2023 in New Haven, CT | 2/2 Semester of Third Year
- Teaching Fellow assignment (3/4)
- Oral exams before winter break
- Apply for research grants and dissertation fellowships

Spring 2024 in New Haven, CT | 1/2 Semester of Fourth Year
- Teaching Fellow assignment (4/4)
- Apply for research grants and dissertation fellowships
- Write dissertation

Fall 2024 in TBD | 2/2 Semester of Fourth Year (extra semester of writing due to teaching early)
- Write dissertation
- First chapter colloquium
- Apply for dissertation fellowships

Spring 2025 in TBD | 1/2 Semester of Fifth Year (UDF)

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[98] Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008), 194.

[99] Michel Foucault, "Questions of method" in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault, 1953-1984*, eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York City: The New Press, 2003), 246-258.

— Write dissertation (chapter three and four)

Fall 2025 in TBD | 2/2 Semester of Fifth Year (UDF)

— Write dissertation (conclusion)

Spring 2026 in TBD | 1/2 Semester of Sixth Year (hopefully with fellowship)

— Write dissertation (finalize)

Fall 2027 in TBD | 2/2 Semester of Sixth Year (hopefully with fellowship)

— Submit dissertation

— Apply for jobs

Spring 2028 in TBD | Post-Ph.D.

— Take on temporary teaching position

— Await job decisions

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